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DAN BROWN OF DENVER: or, THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN DETECTIVE.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "THREE-FINGERED JACK," "GOSPEL GEORGE," "THE LONG HAIRED PARDS," "OLD BULL'S EYE," "PACIFIC PENE,"
"JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," ETC., ETC.



"COLD AND STERN, NOAH CRABTREE STOOD BESIDE THE PRISONER AND FAITHFULLY COUNTED THE LASHES."

"Dan Brown of Denver," The Rocky Mountain Detective.

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AUTHOR OF "THREE-FINGERED JACK," "GOSPEL
GEORGE," "THE LONG HAIRER 'PARDS,'" "OLD BULL'S EYE," "PACIFIC PETE,"
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COOL-BLADE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

CAPTAIN MOONSHINE.

THE rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs rung through the rocky defile as "Tansy" Smith touched up his leaders with his long-lashed whip, eager to reach the now not distant end of his beat. The dingy old stage rattled in its rusty joints, swaying, creaking and groaning upon its stiff leathern springs, like some rheumatic veteran. On through the narrow pass, where, on more than one occasion the stage had been abruptly halted in obedience to the stern commands of armed and threatening road-agents; and Tansy Smith drew a long breath of relief as the rocky trap was left behind them.

"That was the last ditch," he said, addressing a somewhat dandified looking passenger beside him, whose frank demeanor and prime cigars had conquered the veteran's prejudices against fine clothes and scented hair. "Sence Cap. Moonshine an' his black-avised critters didn't lay fer us yender, I reckon we'll reach Grenada without any—*Thunder an' guns!*"

The lead horses suddenly reared up and fell back upon the wheelers, while at the same instant the ribbons were torn from the hands of the driver and his legs, caught at the knee, were pinned to the front end of the coach with painful force.

All this without any visible sign of an enemy, or a sound other than that attending the passage of the stage and the four horses harnessed to it.

In the dim, uncertain twilight that filled the mountain pass, the nature of the silent obstructions could only be guessed at, but the purpose they were to serve, was not long left in doubt.

"Keep your hands clear of weapons, unless you are tired of life!" cried a deep, hoarse, yet not wholly unpleasant voice, as a horseman suddenly emerged from the denser shadows and drew near the stage, holding a revolver in each hand. "No one shall be harmed unless foolish resistance is offered. In that case, the innocent will suffer with the guilty, for my men shall riddle that coach with bullets until it is fit for musketo netting!"

The terrified horses were plunging and kicking madly. The driver was mingling groans of superstitious fear with cries and curses of pain as he vainly strove to free his lower limbs from the excruciating pressure upon them. The inside passengers, thrown into a confused heap by the abrupt stoppage of the coach, were scarcely less demoralized, judging from the half-smothered curses of men and the screams of women that came to the ears of the bold road-agent.

He uttered a sharp whistle, and several men darted out of the shadows and fastened upon the horses, seeking to quiet them.

At the same moment the outside passenger bent downward and freed both himself and driver by one stroke of his knife. With a sullen *twang*, the stout rope parted, and the young man caught up the lines that lay upon the foot-board.

"Take them," he whispered, hurriedly. "Use your whip lively—I'll open the road for you. Remember there's women aboard—"

Tansy Smith was an every-day man, and no crack-brained hero of chivalry. No one better realized the value of life, and flinging aside the reins, he grasped the young man by the wrist, muttering fiercely:

"Easy, ye pesky hot-head! Try to burn powder, an' down ye go, head-fust!"

The keen eyes of the road-agent chief saw that something was amiss, and in obedience to his signal, three men came forward and covered the two men upon the box, with their pistols.

"Blow their brains out at the first crooked move!" were the words that dropped sternly from his lips.

Only a madman would have offered resistance under the circumstances, and Tansy Smith felt the rigid muscles of his companion relax, as he quietly gave over his desperate project, for the present, at least.

"'Twas fer your good as much as mine," the driver muttered, apologetically. "They've got the drop onto us, an' we'd be hafe way to glory by this time, ef I hedn't put the brake on. It's Cap. Moonshine an' his outfit—bad medicine, I tell you!"

At the first appearance of the road-agent, a faint red light found birth among the shadows, and now the crackling flames of a large fire cast a ruddy glow over the scene, paling the rays of the moon and dimming the stars that studded the vault above.

By this light the passengers, both in and on the coach, could see that Captain Moonshine

had spoken no more than the truth. At least twenty masked men were surrounding the vehicle, covering it with their cocked revolvers. Resistance would be folly.

The outlaw paused long enough for this disagreeable fact to impress itself upon the minds of his human game, then advanced to the door of the stage, flinging it open with a turn of his wrist.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he uttered in a tone of mock politeness. "I deeply regret the necessity of interrupting your journey, but business is business. You will kindly oblige me by alighting."

"It's more lead than gold you'd git from me, ef it wasn't fer the wimmen aboard!" growled one of the passengers, as he obeyed the outlaw's command, then turned to assist a slight, trembling figure to alight.

"Blessings on the sweet ones! This is not the first time I have owed my life to them," laughed Captain Moonshine. "Take your stand near the fire. Come—tumble out lively, the rest of you! Business is business, and I have no time to waste."

Two men followed, and, clinging to the arm of the last one, came a woman, whose beautiful face showed ghastly pale in the red glow of the blazing fire.

As she emerged, the young man who had occupied the box-seat with the driver, descended from his perch without awaiting a particular invitation.

These six, together with the driver, comprised the entire human freight carried by the Grenada stage.

Captain Moonshine tersely bade a subordinate overhaul the mail-bags and treasure chest, if there was one aboard, then marshaled the passengers in line before the glowing fire.

Standing before them, his own front was cast into the shade. As before stated, his face was masked by a covering of thick black crape, leaving no facial features visible save the glittering orbs that gleamed through the oblong eye-holes in the mask.

His hair was black as jet, hanging in curling locks to his shoulders, fine and silken as those of a woman. From beneath the mask depended a glossy beard of like raven hue, long and forked.

His form was well-knit and muscular, showing to advantage in a fringed, beaded and embroidered suit of buckskin. A broad belt girded his waist, supporting a knife and the mate to the revolver which he still held cocked in his right hand.

Despite the peril of their situation, those whose journey had been so strangely interrupted, gazed upon the man before them with a certain degree of interest.

Though he had not been long upon the road, at least in that region, Captain Moonshine had made for himself a name and notoriety that will live for years to come in the memory of many a Coloradoan. He and his men seemed ubiquitous. Their daring deeds of robbery, rapine and murder were legion. Ruin and bloodshed followed their footsteps. Many earnest efforts had been made to bring them to book, but never with success. All traps were avoided, or else resulted in the tables being adroitly turned on the enemy, until many really believed that he and his bore a charmed life, through virtue of a compact made with his satanic majesty in person!

Captain Moonshine appeared to court a close scrutiny, and maintained silence for a full minute; but then he spoke, sharply:

"Beginning on the right of the line, you will give me your names, occupations, the place you came from and your destination. Any attempts at concealment or evasion, will be at your peril. I have my reasons for asking the information, and I know enough of the truth to detect any prevarication."

The one on the right was a burly miner, whose answers need find no place here, since he has no further part to play in this chronicle.

The second was the slight, black-vailed woman, who still clung tremblingly to the arm of the man who had assisted her from the coach. He did not give her time to speak, but quietly uttered:

"The one answer'll do fer us both, I reckon, critter. She's my wife—made so as fast as the biggest squire in Denver could do the job. You've skeered her 'most to death with your durned foolishin', a'ready!"

"A timid, blushing bride, eh?" laughed Captain Moonshine, mockingly. "Too bashful to raise her vail. You're a lucky dog, for an old one, Jack Gill!"

"A dog that kin make his teeth meet in the flesh of ary wolf that threatens his lamb, old or no old," sternly retorted the man, his eyes aglow. "I ain't keenin' much what you do to me, but give a crooked look, or raise a finger ag'inst her, an' thar'll be dead meat in these parts—"

"No one covets your 'sweetness,' old man, so you are wasting your breath. I know all about yourself; that you are making a fortune stock-raising, and that you are one of the leaders in the company of Vigilantes recently organized for the express purpose of ridding Colorado of myself and men. Some day we will meet

and settle the question forever. Fall back with the digger, yonder."

The fourth was the young man who had ridden outside.

"My name is Horace Treville, from Boston, a gentleman of leisure, traveling for the benefit of my health, and at present bound for Grenada."

Such was his terse account of himself, and Captain Moonshine bowed mockingly to the person whose appearance and dress seemed so strangely out of place in that wild region.

A silk hat and slender cane; garments of broadcloth, fashionably cut; snowy white linen, with diamond studs and cuff-buttons. A form graceful and rather slender; a face clear pink and white, with regular features; neatly trimmed whiskers; lip and chin smooth shaven; hair cut rather short, of a light brown color; in a word, the picture of a fashionable young gentleman of the upper class.

He, too, was motioned aside, though the outlaw hesitated for a moment while his eyes were fixed upon the glittering stones that shot forth rays of purest light in the lurid glow of the fire.

Without a word the young man from Boston fell back, pausing close beside Jack Gill, but casting a covert glance around upon the half-dozen armed men who stood near as guards.

A sudden and complete change came over the demeanor of Captain Moonshine as he turned toward the two remaining passengers, and a close observer would have felt pretty sure that only the prologue had been spoken—that the purpose for which the stage had been stopped, was intimately connected with this last couple.

"It seems to me that I have met you before," said the road-agent, pausing before the man, who retorted:

"That is quite likely. I am a criminal lawyer, and in the way of business have prosecuted many a rascal. You may have been among the number."

A low laugh came from out the shadows where the road-agents were guarding the coach and passengers telling that they could enjoy a sharp hit, even at the expense of their chief. Neither did he seem seriously displeased by the audacious speech. But not the ghost of a smile appeared upon the angular features of the lawyer, as he gave the desired information concerning himself.

"My name is Ezra Blackwood. I am a lawyer, from St. Louis. My immediate destination is Grenada. Somewhere near there lives a gentleman named Noah Crabtree, an uncle of this lady, who is on her way to pay him and his family a long-promised visit. She being my ward, I have acted as her escort thus far on her journey."

The lawyer spoke as though from the witness box, without one unnecessary word, but, though he seemed to be listening intently, the road-agent looked only at the fair maiden who clung closely to the speaker.

The two formed a strong contrast. Both were taller than ordinary, but there the similarity ended.

The form of the young lady was symmetry itself, rounded and well developed; that of her companion was but little better than a mass of bones, joints and angles, thrown together at random and kept from falling apart by a parchment-colored skin. Her features were clear-cut and almost classical in their regularity; her complexion very fair for a brunette, but the total absence of color in her face might be attributed to the strange situation in which she so unexpectedly found herself. Ezra Blackwood was yellow as saffron, his face clean shaven, his mouth only perceptible as a thin slit beneath his long, hooked nose. From the clerical cut of his clothes, and his austere demeanor, he might easily have been mistaken for some dyspeptic minister of the gospel.

"The lady has a tongue of her own, and doubtless can speak for herself," suggested Captain Moonshine, waving his hand impatiently.

"Fall back with the others, sir."

Ezra Blackwood hesitated for a moment, as the lady clung to his arm in evident fear, but then the road-agent shook his cocked revolver menacingly, and with a whispered word in the ear of his fair companion, the lawyer obeyed.

"You have nothing to fear from me, lady, outlaw though I may be," added Captain Moonshine, in a much more gentle tone. Your name, please?"

"Rachel Trowbridge," in a clear, musical tone.

"Daughter and only child of the late Charles Trowbridge, of St. Louis, Missouri!"

The maiden bowed in silence, though there was a wondering light in her eyes as they rested upon the masked outlaw, who was leaning forward, apparently listening with breathless interest for her answer.

Captain Moonshine stepped forward and took her reluctant hand. There was strong emotion in his voice as he spoke again.

"Miss Trowbridge, you only know me as an outlaw—one whose hand is raised against all men, even as their hands are armed against me. It is natural that you should regard me with suspicion, and you may not believe me when I

say that, at the present moment, I am the truest friend you have upon earth—that you are in great danger from secret enemies—that your very life is threatened; and that I alone of all men can save you from death, or a fate infinitely worse. The danger is great—so great that the remedy must be heroic—but I can and will save you, if you only consent to trust me wholly, entirely."

The maiden shrunk back, awed more by his ardent, excited manner than his words. He frowned, and stamped one foot impatiently.

"You doubt your best friend, but I will save you despite yourself," he said, making a signal that brought a subordinate to his side.

"Detail six men to accompany me. The rest will remain here under your command. When we have gone, pluck the prisoners, but do them no bodily injury, unless they cut up rusty. In that case, quiet them."

While he spoke, Rachel Trowbridge retreated toward her guardian, who was now standing beside her, head erect, a hard look in his gray eyes that boded mischief.

Captain Moonshine laughed shortly as he noted this.

"Miss Trowbridge, you will prepare to accompany me."

"She is my ward, and under my care. She shall not be forced to act against her will while I live and breathe," uttered Blackwood, in a cold, yet resolute tone.

"That will not be long, unless you cease acting the fool. Stand aside, and let the lady advance, or by the stars above! I'll bore your brain with a bullet!"

As he spoke, Captain Moonshine raised his revolver, but with a harsh snarl of rage, the gaunt lawyer leaped forward, a long knife gleaming in his grasp.

The outlaw never flinched, but his pistol exploded, and with a horrible, choking sound, Ezra Blackwood paused in his mad onset. His arms were flung upward. The knife fell from his grasp, and then he sunk in a heap almost at the feet of the outlaw leader.

With a short, cruel laugh, Captain Moonshine spurned the body with his foot, then strode forward and placed his hand upon the shoulder of the trembling maiden.

"Come—there has been too much time wasted already. I would gladly have spared you this scene, but the rash fool brought it upon himself."

Sick with horror, and her heart filled with a nameless terror, Rachel Trowbridge yielded to his firm grasp without a word or effort at resistance. She was like a helpless bird charmed by a rattlesnake.

But the end was not yet. Despite the dread fate which had overtaken Ezra Blackwood, there was one among the spectators who resolved the maiden should not be sacrificed, if one man could avert that calamity.

This was Horace Treville, the young man from Boston. He had been a close observer of all that had transpired, and he believed that the outlaw meant the maiden evil.

As yet none of the party had been either robbed or disarmed, and though the odds against them were terrible, he believed a sudden attack might accomplish wonders. Taking advantage of the outlaw chief's conversation with Rachel, he first whispered to the miner, bidding him be ready for hot work at the signal, then turned to Jack Gill, whose bold words when confronting Captain Moonshine had strongly impressed him with that worthy's courage.

"We can whip them if we are in dead earnest," he whispered, after broaching the subject. "Hold yourself in readiness to back me. I will make sure of the leader first of all—"

At this moment it was that Ezra Blackwood fell before the pistol of his ruthless adversary, and as the outlaw placed his hand upon the arm of Rachel to lead her away, the young man from Boston gave Jack Gill the signal for work.

But then something hard struck him back of the ear, and he was hurled headlong to the feet of Captain Moonshine!

CHAPTER II.

"LOVE LAUGHS AT LOCKSMITHS."

ON that same night, but nearly forty miles away from the rocky defile in which Captain Moonshine halted the Grenada coach, and some two hours later, certain events were transpiring that closely concern this chronicle.

A horseman rode into a small clump of trees which grew upon the western bank of the narrow river, and dismounting, he tethered his animal to a pendent bough, then glided out of the timber, pausing upon the edge of the moonlighted plain.

Half a mile distant his keen eyes could just distinguish a long, low line that he knew was formed by the house, outbuildings and corrals of Noah Crabtree, the uncle of Rachel Trowbridge, and one of the most prosperous stock-raisers in that section of Colorado.

"If the old rascal was but half-way reasonable, I need not now be acting like a thief in the night," fell from the lips of the young man as he glided away from the motte and approached the cattle ranch. "Because he is half-crazy on the question of religion, he must try to wreck

the happiness and future lives of two lovers, but if his eyes are not opened in the morning, I'll eat my old hat!"

Still muttering, but barely above his breath, the young man cautiously approached the buildings, sinking flat upon his stomach as he drew nearer, but crossing the ground in that awkward position with an ease and rapidity that spoke volumes for his skill as a scout.

There were no lights visible about the premises, and, apparently satisfied that there were none of the household afoot, the scout turned and crawled toward one of the corrals.

Here he anticipated the greatest trouble and danger, but he was playing for a high and precious stake, and was fully prepared for what might come.

His actions showed that he was thoroughly acquainted with the ground and the internal arrangements of the horse corrals, for he wasted no time in idle motions.

He knew that each night Noah Crabtree had all of his horses brought up and corraled, while certain of his herders stood guard over them, aided by several savage dogs.

These unusual precautions were necessitated by the great number of thefts which had taken place during the past few months. There appeared to be an organized and numerous band of horse-thieves infesting that section, for whom no exploit seemed too bold or dangerous. As yet, Noah Crabtree's stock had not been molested, but the blow might come at any hour, and the stern old man had his property under guard both day and night.

"I'd lay long odds that the boys are dozing, and if the dogs don't scent me out—"

The words had scarcely been formed in his mind before he knew that the dreaded peril was upon him.

A low, snarling bark broke the stillness of the night, and a huge dark shape bounded directly toward the scout as he lay upon the short grass in the moonlight.

Quick as thought he raised himself to his knees, his right hand grasping a bared knife, his left arm bent as a guard to his throat. At the same time he uttered a low, guarded whistle. Doubtless this would have been recognized and obeyed in the broad light of day, though the scout now recognized the dog as one of the worst dispositioned on the ranch; but the faithful beast was not to be thus diverted from its duty.

Without another sound, like a wild wolf or panther, the huge creature launched itself upon the prowling shape, its massive jaws closing upon the man's arm instead of throat as intended. Nor did a sound part the lips of the scout, though he felt the grinding teeth sinking deep and almost meeting in the flesh, but with a swift, deadly thrust, he plunged his long knife to the very hilt in the broad breast of the dog, fairly cleaving its heart in twain.

Not a sound came from the lips of the death-stricken animal, and satisfied that the bloody work was well done, the scout, leaving the keen blade in its quivering sheath, raised the carcass in his arms and hastened with it to the nearest corral, where he crouched down in the shadows cast by the stout fence.

For a short space he listened with painful intentness, but as no suspicious sound came to his ears, he drew a long breath of relief.

"Sleeping, as I thought, or they would have heard the yelp of that infernal brute!" he muttered, giving the carcass a vicious kick as a sharp twinge of pain shot through his lacerated forearm. "Let them keep it up half an hour longer, and I'll ask no odds of them."

Knotting a handkerchief around his arm, which was now bleeding with disagreeable freedom, the scout passed rapidly and noiselessly along until at the bars, which, at this corral, served the purpose of a gate.

Not a little to his disgust, though it was no more than he might have expected, the night-walker discovered a human form leaning against one of the stout posts. The guard, if such he could be called, was seated upon the ground, his head thrown back, an occasional snore proclaiming the soundness of his slumber.

Gripping the back of his blood-stained knife between his teeth, the scout crept forward noiselessly until close before the sleeping sentinel, then fastened a deadly gripe upon his exposed throat.

"Not a word or a sound from your lips, or I'll carve your heart to the core!" he hissed sharply as the astounded fellow awoke. "I'll do you no harm if you are sensible, but you'll be grub for the coyotes if you attempt to raise an alarm."

Taken completely by surprise, and finding himself powerless in the grasp of one whose muscles appeared to possess the strength of a giant, the herder sensibly resigned himself to the inevitable.

Still clasping his throat with one hand, the scout removed the weapons from his belt and cast them aside.

"You know who I am," he added, speaking rapidly. "I don't want to hurt you, but I have gone too far to be foiled now. I am going to bind and gag you. The other boys will find you in the morning, safe enough."

"A hoss-thief, Will Wilder—I didn't think it o' you!"

"I mean to borrow a horse, but you can tell old Noah that he will find it to-morrow at Grenada. Now open your potato-trap—so!"

While speaking, Wilder was dexterously binding the luckless herder, and now applied a gag that would effectually prevent any outcry. Then, leaving him still propped up against the fence, the scout lowered the bars and entered the corral.

There were a dozen or more horses in the small inclosure, and Wilder found little difficulty in securing a certain one of the number, placing upon it a halter which he unwound from around his waist.

Hitching the animal to the fence, he passed outside and silently stole up to the house. He lost no time in idle searching, but proceeded direct to where a side-saddle and bridle were lying, as though placed there for his especial benefit. Securing these, Wilder hastened back and placed them upon the selected horse, then led the animal slowly away toward the distant motte, keeping carefully in line with the corral which he knew was guarded only by a bound and helpless man.

As quickly as prudent he increased his pace, soon leaving the stolen animal beside his own steed, then rapidly retracing his steps to the cattle ranch.

Pausing at the west end of the building, Wilder picked up several small pebbles and tossed them upward against the window under the eaves. Almost immediately it was raised, and the dimly outlined figure of a girl became visible. A brief interchange of signals, then the window was lowered.

Wilder passed around the building, his pulses bounding with a mad exultation, as he saw the form of his loved one emerge from the rear door, then pause as if doubting the prudence of the important step she was taking. But he did not give her a chance to retreat if such had been her thought.

Leaping swiftly forward, he wound his nervous arms around her, and clasped her close to his heart.

"My darling—my brave, noble girl!"

His lips sought hers with a passionate warmth that seemed to frighten the maiden, but she could not draw back.

With a gentle force he was drawing her away from their dangerous proximity to the house, toward the motte. Once or twice she seemed on the point of uttering some remonstrance, but as often did the ardent lover cut short the murmur by the warm application of his lips to hers.

But their flight was not to be wholly without interruption. When only a few rods from the house, there came to their ears a sound the counterpart of that uttered by the hound with whom Will Wilder had fought, and turning, he beheld a wolf-like shape darting swiftly toward him.

With an angry exclamation that sounded suspiciously like an oath, Wilder pushed the maiden behind him, then drew his knife and prepared to meet the fierce brute.

Straight at his throat the bloodhound was leaping, when Ruth Crabtree glided between, one hand uplifted, uttering a guarded but clear cry.

As if by magic the ferocious creature was checked in its mad rush, and crouched low down upon its belly, its threatening snarl changed to a whining sound.

"Back, Music!" uttered the girl, speaking as sternly as was possible for her gentle nature. "Back to the kennel!"

The bloodhound cowered still lower, but made no further sign of obedience. Wilder laughed shortly.

"Looks as though the brute suspected the truth—that its master was on the point of losing his dearest treasure."

This was an unlucky speech to make at that moment, for it gave the maiden courage to utter what she had before attempted in vain.

"Will, forgive me—but I cannot do it!" she sobbed. "Let me return while there is yet time. It is a sin I am committing in thus fleeing like a thief from my parents' roof. No good can come of it—only evil! Let me return, and let us wait in hopes. We are young—our love is so tender and true that its reward must come in good time, if we are only patient."

There were few things which Will Wilder would have refused the fair pleader, but this was one of them. What lover would have yielded, with perfect bliss but a short distance ahead—blank despair behind?

Again he pressed the maiden to his broad bosom, and in passionate words reasoned with her. They would sound incoherent if placed on paper, but they were eloquence itself when breathed in the ear of one who loved and was beloved.

He had a sound basis to reason on, too.

Noah Crabtree, the father of Ruth, was a man who should have been born two centuries earlier, for he would have been a shining light among the austere, religion-crazed Puritans. Earnest, sincere and well-meaning, his children grew up to fear, rather than love him. The

slightest misdemeanor was visited with severe punishment; each childish laugh was greeted by a frown; to sing, whistle or play was a crime. The result may be easily divined. Ruth grew up a trembling, broken-spirited flower; David, his only son, a meek-faced hypocrite.

Never until Will Wilder came courting her, had Ruth ventured to have a wish or entertain a thought contrary to the will of her father. But the love that is the heart life of woman, though smothered almost from her birth, now awoke and endowed her with a courage such as she had never known before.

Until he met Ruth, Will Wilder had led a rough and not entirely blameless life, though there was nothing very black in his past record, when his surroundings were considered. He was fond of cards and drink. Had been engaged in one or two affrays where blood had flowed freely, but had never come under the frown of the law itself.

To most Western men, this record would have been leniently looked upon, but not so to Noah Crabtree. In his eyes, Will Wilder was a veritable child of the adversary, and from the first he had frowned upon the young man's frequent visits. But, Wilder cared little for black looks, and one day he coolly avowed his love for Ruth, and demanded her hand in marriage.

For the first time in his life, Noah Crabtree allowed his strong passions to get the better of him, and, athlete though he was, Wilder found himself like a child in the mighty grasp of the enraged father. He was pitched headlong out of the house, and only for the intervention of Ruth, bloodshed would certainly have followed.

She sprung between them, and Wilder replaced the knife he had drawn, and departed at her tearful request.

But from the beginning of time, love has laughed at locksmiths, and Will Wilder was all the more determined to win his heart's idol, for he knew that to do so would be the bitterest blow he could deal the man who had treated him so unceremoniously.

Through the aid of David Crabtree, who jumped at the chance of outwitting the parent he both feared and hated, the lover made arrangements with Ruth by which they were enabled to enjoy frequent interviews, none the less sweet from being stolen, and in the end gained her consent to an elopement.

They were to flee in the night, ride to Grenada, where Wilder had made arrangements for their immediate wedding, then to take the outgoing stage to spend the honeymoon, and await the reconciliation of Noah Crabtree to the inevitable.

Fearful of another and more serious interruption, Wilder gently forced Ruth toward the grove, while arguing with her, unnoticed the hound that crept after them, until a mournful sound caused them both to start.

Lifting its nose high in the air, the bloodhound was uttering a long-drawn, lugubrious howl that floated on the night air like the wail of some lost spirit.

"Come!" muttered Wilder, with difficulty choking back a bitter curse that rose to his lips. "That infernal brute will rouse the sleepers, and there will be powder burnt in dead earnest if we are overtaken now!"

"No—I must return; it is a warning!" gasped Ruth. "I feel that our sin will be bitterly punished."

"Only a cur howling—don't be superstitious, Ruth. It is too late now to turn back. Nor would you care to do so, if your love was anything near as strong as mine."

It was a cruel speech, and so he felt it, even as he spoke, but he believed he was uttering it for her own good.

Sobbing she sunk upon his bosom, and feeling not the pain in his lacerated arm, he raised her light form from the ground and hastened toward the motte.

Behind him the hound still howled mournfully, as though foreseeing the dread ending of that flight.

There was not a drop of superstitious blood in Wilder's veins, and his only fear was that the mournful sound would awaken the suspicions of Noah Crabtree, or his herders, who were supposed to be guarding the corrals.

"If they follow, they must kill before they take!" he muttered beneath his breath, as he drew near the timber.

Pausing at its edge, he glanced keenly back. The hound was still howling where they had left it, but otherwise all was still. There were no signs of life visible in the direction of the ranch. Surely if the alarm had been given, there would be excited shouts and lights flashing around the premises?

With a new-born fear, Wilder looked down into the face of the maiden, who had lain so still and silent that he began to be alarmed, but he saw that her eyes were open, and as he looked, she slipped to the ground, standing erect, though still weak and trembling.

"Say good-by and leave me, Will," she murmured. "It is better so. No good can come of our earning a father's curse—I dare not go any further."

"Ruth, darling, in a few hours we can reach

town, where a minister of the gospel is waiting to bless our union. Once married, your father will relent. He is too sensible to fight a useless battle, and he loves you too dearly to cast you out of his heart because you wedded the man you love. If I thought otherwise—if I believed he would not forgive you—dearly as I love you, darling, I would take you back and go away, to hide my grief as best I could. But I know better. A few days, a month, perhaps; then he will send for us."

Much more he said, tending to the same purpose, and while he spoke he really believed what he said. Passion blinded him to the truth, and strong love was rapidly obscuring the better judgment of the maiden. Her own heart was singing the same sweet tune, and it is not to be wondered at that the ardent lover eventually gained his point.

With a glad cry he lifted the maiden into the saddle, then turned to his own horse; but at that moment he was confronted by four men with leveled pistols.

"Surrender! or by the God of Israel you die!"

CHAPTER III.

A ROMANTIC BRIDAL.

"Go easy, boss!" cried Jack Gill, sharply, as Captain Moonshine, startled by the fall of the young man from Boston almost at his feet, wheeled and raised his pistol. "I knocked the hot-headed critter down to save wuss trouble; 'nother minnit an' he'd 'a' mounted ye like a wild-cat, fer troublin' the miss, yender."

For a moment the road-agent stood in doubt, and during that time the lives of the prisoners hung upon a hair, but Jack Gill spoke again:

"I wasn't through no great love fer you thet I did it, critter; but the boy was riskin' the life o' my wife as well as his own. Only fer her, mebbe I mought 'a' sailed in too, an' hed a smell o' the fun, anyway."

This very bluntness served better than a more conciliatory speech. A bold man himself, Captain Moonshine could appreciate the same quality in others. But he had taken a strong aversion to the young man from Boston, and made a quick gesture with the hand that was furthest from Rachel Trowbridge.

The next instant there was a sharp explosion, and those nearest the spot could see that the young man from Boston gave an involuntary start with the upper portion of his body, then settled back limp and motionless. One of the outlaws had discharged a revolver point-blank at the unfortunate fellow's head.

Rachel uttered a faint cry of horror, and a deathly sickness came over her as this brutal deed was committed almost at her very feet. Her brain reeled, and she sunk helpless upon the arm of Captain Moonshine.

"Toss that carrion into the bushes, then fetch forward the horses," cried the road-agent, sharply.

He was promptly obeyed in both respects. Two men raised the limp carcass, gave it a swing or two, then cast it from them into the middle of a clump of bushes near the rock wall.

"Wolf," added Captain Moonshine, addressing the ruffian who had fired the shot, "you will go through these pilgrims as soon as I am gone. Keep them and the hearse here until I return, or you hear from me."

The horses were brought forward while he was speaking, but before he could mount, a strange event occurred.

Ezra Blackwood, whom all had supposed dead, raised his head and stared wildly around him. As his bewildered gaze rested upon the unconscious form of Rachel Trowbridge, strength returned to him like magic and he scrambled to his feet with a sharp cry:

"Kill me if you will, but spare her!"

He was leaping toward the road-agent, his bony fingers hooked like bird's claws, his angular features distorted and rendered almost hideous by strong emotion, when several of the outlaws pounced upon him, holding him helpless despite his furious struggles. And Wolf stepped forward, baring his long knife, looking inquiringly back at his chief.

For an instant Captain Moonshine seemed on the point of giving the fatal signal that would result in forever quieting the troublesome lawyer, but as a second thought struck him, he cried:

"Mount the old fool on a horse and fetch him along. He will do for one of the witnesses."

By this time Rachel gave signs of returning consciousness, and seeing this, Ezra Blackwood grew calmer. By pledging himself to give no further trouble, he was not bound in the saddle.

Captain Moonshine mounted, and motioned for Wolf to hand him the captive maiden. She shrunk back with a shudder, and the lawyer called out:

"If you have a spark of manhood left, let her ride with me. For her sake, I pledge my word of honor, that neither of us will make any attempt at escape."

"Break that pledge, and my next shot will strike closer to the mark," said Captain Moonshine, coldly, as he dismounted and lifted Rachel to a seat behind her guardian.

No more was said, and a moment later the five outlaws, with their two captives, were riding rapidly away from the spot where such a strange drama had been enacted.

Their course led up the rocky gorge for a mile or more, then the frowning walls spread out on either hand. The region through which they were passing was a wild and forbidding one, though the harsher features were hidden or softened by the uncertain light of the moon and stars. The trail was a crooked and intricate one, but both horses and riders seemed thoroughly acquainted with it, and rapid progress was made.

At the end of nearly an hour's steady riding, another gorge was entered, and after following this for a few minutes, the outlaw chieftan drew rein and dismounted.

"We are near our journey's end, and though I do not believe either of you will dare betray our secrets after what you are yet to see, the laws of our brotherhood oblige me to blindfold you."

Ezra Blackwood seemed to realize the worse than folly of resistance under the circumstances, and without a word submitted to have his eyes covered. Guided by him, Rachel also yielded in silence.

There was a strong vein of romance in the young lady's composition, and though she still felt the horror of what had occurred, she was also growing interested in the strange drama, of which she felt herself a central figure.

When satisfied that the bandages were properly adjusted, Captain Moonshine, with a brief apology for the liberty he was taking, raised Rachel in his arms and bore her onward through the gloom. She could hear the footsteps of others following them, but that was all. In what direction they were proceeding, or to what end, she was sublimely ignorant. Yet, strange as it may appear, she was no longer frightened. Her natural courage had returned to her, and she felt a greater degree of curiosity than of fear concerning what was to be the end of this strange adventure.

From the peculiar echo of the various footfalls, Rachel at length suspected that they had entered some sort of cavern or underground apartment. A moment later, when Captain Moonshine gently removed the bandage from her eyes, she saw that her suspicions were correct.

The underground apartment seemed a very spacious one, but its full extent could only be guessed at. The one oil lamp, sitting upon a covered table near the center, was not powerful enough to light up the entire chamber. But its rays showed a remarkable degree of comfort for such a habitation.

The center of the rock floor was covered by a carpet. Scattered around were a number of camp-stools. Upon the table rested a silver water pitcher and goblets; but strangest of all was a large book—the Holy Bible!

Seated at the table, and bearing the appearance of having been reading the sacred volume, was a tall, spare, gray-haired man, whose countenance, though sad and careworn, was that of a saint on earth, rather than a man such as might have been expected to be found in such company. A single glance at his face gave the maiden a greater sense of security than the presence of a troop of soldiers could have done.

"Miss Trowbridge," said Captain Moonshine, quietly drawing her aside a few paces, and speaking with an earnestness that could not be wholly feigned, "all this must appear very strange and even terrible to you. But in acting thus, I have been wholly actuated by a desire to preserve you from a terrible peril—to give you a talisman that will effectually guard you against your bitter, ruthless enemies."

Rachel opened her lips to speak, but he checked her.

"I know all you would say, but enemies you have, who are plotting against your life, for the sake of obtaining the vast fortune which was left you by your father. How I know this, matters not now. Some day the whole truth will be made known to you. But this I say—and I will swear to its truth by my dead mother's grave, while kissing yonder sacred book—two men whom you would least suspect, have sworn your death. One is a distant relative who, were you to die before coming of legal age, or unmarried, will fall heir to your fortune."

"How I learned of the plot, is too long a story to tell now; enough that before we part you shall be given indisputable proof of the truth of what I say. Enough that I resolved to save you, if possible. There was only one way in which this could be done. I am an outlaw, upon whose head a dozen prices are set, with every man's hand against me. For that reason I could not guard you and fight your battles openly, as I would dearly like to do."

"Why should you take such a deep interest in me, an utter stranger?" asked Rachel, wonderingly.

"I have met you more than once, though you may have forgotten me; it was while you were young, and long before your father died. I knew him well. He was the best and truest—almost the only—friend I ever had. I loved

him as a father, and as I would have died to serve him, so I am ready to do the same in your behalf.

"There is only one way in which I can serve you now. So long as you are a single woman, you are in terrible danger. Your enemies' plans can only be foiled by your marrying, thus putting another life between them and the treasure they are craftily plotting for. Marry me—"

Rachel Trowbridge shrunk away from the speaker with a low cry, though his words should have prepared her for some such announcement.

"Hear me out before you reject my plan, lady," added the road-agent, his deep voice softening almost to sadness. "You shall be but a wife in name. The ceremony must be a legal one, and yonder is a minister of the gospel whom I have provided for that purpose. But, I will take any oath you may dictate, and swear by my dead mother's memory, on yonder Bible, never to molest you or claim any of the rights of a husband, unless you make the first advances. Then I will come, for—I love you—I have loved you since you were a little thing in short clothes, in the days when my heart was clear, and my hand free from bloodshed."

Despite her better judgment, the romantic girl was strongly impressed with these words, so earnestly spoken, and, obeying an impulse which she felt powerless to resist, she murmured:

"Let me see your face, and see if I can read there the truth of the words you have spoken."

A momentary hesitation, then Captain Moonshine raised his hat and mask, revealing a face of remarkable beauty, where not hidden by the full black beard and mustache. Dark as an Italian, but with pure complexion, and aquiline nose, and large, lustrous eyes; a bold, handsome face.

Only a moment the mask was raised, and even then his hat was held so as to shield his face from the view of those near the table, while still allowing the light to fall upon his features; but, brief as was the space, it was long enough for another beside the maiden to indelibly imprint his picture upon a tenacious memory.

"I believe you—I will trust you—and may Heaven reward or punish you as you keep or break your solemn oath!" murmured Rachel, sensible of a strong fascination in those lustrous orbs.

"Thanks! you shall never regret your trust!" uttered Captain Moonshine, a certain exultation ringing in his tones, that struck the maiden like a cold chill.

But the fatal words were spoken, and there could be no retraction now. Nor did the road-agent give her time to reflect upon what she was doing. In a few sharp words he bade the minister perform his duty.

Ezra Blackwood seemed like one dumfounded for a moment, then loudly protested; but two men fastened upon him, and when Rachel, in answer to a question from the holy man, declared that she was acting of her own free will, the lawyer subsided with a hollow groan of despair.

The ceremony was quickly performed—Ezra Blackwood, who appeared to have regained his wonted composure, giving the bride away.

Pale as death itself, Rachael Trowbridge went through the trying ordeal, her responses firm, though low. Some strange fascination exerted by the man whom she was so blindly wedding, seemed to bear her up and urge her on, even while her heart told her that she was blasting her whole future life by so acting.

The last words were spoken, and Rachael was pronounced a wife—wife of a man whose name had not yet been spoken!

It was clear that Captain Moonshine had carefully plotted this romantic bridal. Nothing was omitted or forgotten. He produced a marriage certificate, and gently spoke to Rachel:

"It is not strictly necessary that you should sign your name; any one else could fill out the blank, but as this paper is to be your shield against your enemies, your own handwriting there will be an additional proof that the document is strictly legal. Please sign."

Still under that strange, magnetic influence, Rachel filled out the blank as desired. Then the witnesses and the clergymen added their signatures in the proper places.

"You may all stand aside, save and except my wife," said the road-agent. "For certain reasons, I prefer keeping my real name a secret from all but her."

Saying this, he turned again to the table with a sudden movement that knocked the ink-bottle to the rocky floor, where it broke to pieces. With a short laugh, Captain Moonshine drew a small bottle from his pocket, and unscrewed the top. Trying the pen on his thumb nail, he threw it aside and produced another. With this, he wrote a name in bold characters, then handed it to Rachel to read, breathing a few words in her ear as he did so.

That name was BEVERLEY BROWNELL!

Scarcely had Rachel read this, when a masked man hurriedly approached the table by which they stood.

Captain Moonshine turned sharply upon the intruder, but, ere he could speak, the lamp was hurled to the floor, and he himself was knocked senseless half-way across the room!

Rachel felt strong arms raising her from her feet. She uttered one shrill cry, then fainted dead away.

CHAPTER IV.

WILDWOOD JUSTICE.

WILL WILDER realized the full extent of his peril at a glance. He saw that the leader of the intruders, and the one who uttered the startling words already recorded, was none other than Noah Crabtree himself. He saw that they held his life at their finger-ends, but he did not despair, nor would he tamely yield.

The men were on foot. Ruth was already mounted. If he were once in the saddle, one bold dash might remedy all—and he made the desperate attempt.

With a catlike bound he reached and struck the animal ridden by the maiden, a sharp blow with his open hand, that sent the fiery creature dashing through the undergrowth, snorting with pain and affright.

As he did so, Wilder heard a pistol explode and felt the wind of the bullet as it passed close to his ear. But he made no move toward using his weapons. For more reasons than one he was desirous of escaping without shedding blood, and sprung actively to the side of his own horse. Another bound carried him into the saddle, but by that time his enemies were upon him.

Striking out with hands and feet, fighting as only a man can where all is at stake, Wilder freed his limbs from the brawny hands that clutched him, and for a few moments it seemed as though he would still escape.

But then one of the men thrust the muzzle of a revolver fairly into the ear of the plunging, terrified horse, and drew trigger. The death-stricken creature plunged heavily forward, falling headlong, carrying with it Will Wilder.

"On him! but spare his life for the present. We are no assassins!" cried Noah Crabtree, whose pistol it was that brought the poor horse low in death.

As he spoke, he flung aside the smoking weapon and pounced upon Wilder, who had been taken by surprise when his horse fell. But still he made good his claim as a rare good rough-and-tumble fighter.

One swift blow laid the veteran's nose nearly flat with his cheek-bones, and sent him backward into a briar-bush, where a second man quickly bore him company. But then the other two flung themselves upon him, and bore him backward to the ground.

By this time Wilder was almost insane with rage and fury. He forgot his prudential resolutions. He only felt that he must conquer or die, and freeing one arm by a desperate exertion of strength, he whipped out his knife and plunged the keen blade to the hilt in the throat of one of his adversaries.

The stroke was a fatal one, but ere it could be repeated, a crushing blow from behind descended upon his head, and he sunk senseless to the ground.

"Bind him hand and foot," sternly cried Noah Crabtree, replacing the revolver whose metal-bound butt had nearly crushed in the young man's skull. "Watch over him here, but do not injure him, unless there is an attempt at a rescue. Then blow his brains out!"

Leaving the two men to carry out his orders, the father hastened through the timber in the direction his errant child had taken. His lips parted to utter a call when he reached the open, but there was no necessity for it. Ruth was rapidly riding toward him, having turned as soon as she could master her frightened horse.

Noah Crabtree strode forward and grasped her bridle-reins, turning the animal's head toward their home. But love lent Ruth a courage usually foreign to her nature, and she offered resistance.

"Where is he—I must see him—"

"You have seen him once too often," gloomily responded her father. "He is alive; let that suffice. We are no assassins, though the life-blood of at least one good man rests heavily upon his head. Come—there has been force enough used to-night. Do not try my temper too severely."

The stern coldness with which he spoke, beat down the maiden's feeble courage, and she no longer resisted.

Back to the ranch Noah Crabtree led her, tethering the horse to a post, then lifting Ruth from the saddle and bearing her into the house as he might an infant. Reaching her chamber, whither the wife and mother, trembling and afraid to utter a word or question, followed them. Locking them both in the room, Noah Crabtree left the building and hastening to a small storehouse hard by, brought forth a bundle of rockets, three of which he ignited at brief but regular intervals.

High into the air they hissed, bursting into a brilliant shower of colored stars with a sharp

report, forming a signal that was visible for miles around. And those who saw the soaring missiles, knew that there was stern work on hand for the company of Vigilantes, of whom Noah Crabtree was the chief.

This done, the stock-raiser led the young horse away to one of the corrals, removing saddle and bridle and then turning the animal loose among its fellows, after which he strode rapidly back to the timber motte.

At this point, a brief explanation may not come amiss.

That prolonged howling of the bloodhound had done the work. Aroused by the sound, Noah Crabtree arose and left the house. He heard excited voices near the corrals, and hastened thither, just as the bound and gagged herdsman was released by his fellow watchers.

Unable to give the alarm, the man had been a witness of the elopement, and in a few words stated as much.

As only a brief time had elapsed, Noah Crabtree darted toward the timber, closely followed by the three men, trusting that he would yet be in time to intercept the fugitive lovers. And had not Will Wilder been so deeply absorbed in reasoning down the misgivings of his dear one, he must have heard the sound of their hasty footsteps in time to have made his escape. But fate willed it otherwise. That moonlight night was to be the turning point in more than one life, for good or evil.

Noah Crabtree found Will Wilder cool and defiant when he returned to the grove, to await the coming of the Vigilantes, whom he had signaled. He knew that all was lost. From his uncomfortable position he had noticed the ascending rockets, and if he had held any doubts as to their meaning, the comments of his two guards would have enlightened him. He had shed blood, in self-defense, it is true, but he felt that plea would avail him little. And believing that he was fore-doomed to suffer death, he mentally vowed that his enemies should not have their triumph increased by his showing them the white feather.

Noah Crabtree bade one of the men return to the ranch, to direct the Vigilantes aright as they came in.

After this, not a word was spoken by either of the trio left with the dead herder in the motte until, one by one or in couples, the Vigilantes began to reach the scene. Even then Noah Crabtree maintained a stony silence, only arising from beside the prisoner and speaking when some twenty of the settlers were collected. This number was a majority of the entire band, and all that was necessary for the dark work on hand.

In a few words as possible, Noah Crabtree detailed the events of the night, though those who best comprehended his proud spirit only knew how terribly he must suffer in laying bare the deception practiced by his only daughter.

"Had it only been this, I would have dealt with him alone," he added, in the same cold, measured tone, "but he has taken life, and in slaying one of our number has rendered himself amenable to the law—not the corrupt law of the regular courts, but that which we have one and all sworn to exercise in defense of our lives and our property. Hence I summoned you here."

"There is yet another charge against him," suddenly uttered one of the Vigilantes, a tall, middle-aged man of fine appearance despite his rude garb. "I accuse him of being a thief—of robbing me of nearly a thousand dollars late this afternoon—"

A wild, fierce cry from the accused cut his words short, and Wilder struggled furiously to burst his bonds.

"It is a lie—a foul lie!" he cried, fairly frothing at the mouth. "Bad enough I may be, but no man can truthfully say that I ever stole a penny!"

"Nor would I have believed it, short of the evidence of my own eyesight," calmly returned the other. "But I am ready to make oath to the truth of my charge."

"Silence!" sternly uttered Noah Crabtree, as Wilder was about to angrily reply. "At the proper time we will listen to your defense. Silence now, unless you would be gagged."

Grinding his teeth together, and biting his lip until the blood flowed freely, Will Wilder managed to control his mad passion for the present, knowing that an outburst could only do him harm.

The preliminaries were speedily arranged. Twelve men were selected as jurors, and as Wilder only showed his teeth in a smile of scorn when asked if he objected to any of the number, they were briefly sworn in by Noah Crabtree who, by virtue of his office as chief of the Vigilantes, was constituted judge without a vote. Then the wildwood court was pronounced in session.

Noah Crabtree repeated his accusation under oath, and each one of the witnesses was solemnly sworn to tell nothing but the truth, on a pocket Bible which was the chief's constant companion.

James Kintner, the man whom Wilder bound and gagged at the entrance to the corral, swore to his stealing a horse from the inclosure.

But heaviest of all, came the evidence of Thomas Munro, who affirmed that he had been robbed by the prisoner.

Condensed, his story ran as follows:

He had that day completed the sale of a large lot of cattle, to a buyer in Grenada, and received the cash for his goods. Returning home with this, he had been waylaid by six men, under lead of Will Wilder. There could be no mistake on this point, for during the brief struggle which he made in defense of his property, the mask which covered the face of the outlaw leader, broke its fastenings and fell to the ground.

"I have known the prisoner for nearly a year, and, until to-day, always regarded him as an honest man. But I was grappling with him at the moment his mask dropped, and had a fair view of his face. It so amazed me, that I was easily overpowered and robbed. I was left bound and gagged, in a clump of bushes. It was dark before I succeeded in freeing myself, and I had just reached home when I saw the signal calling us together.

"This is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me heaven!"

"May the Lord forgive you for swearing away my life, Thomas Munro!" said Will Wilder, in a husky voice as he was assisted to his feet. "You must know that every word you have uttered is a foul lie, but I don't suppose any of the rest will believe me when I solemnly swear that I am as innocent of this crime as the child unborn. You have resolved to murder me, and all I may say can make no difference, so go on with the music! You shall see how an honest white man can die, if you never did before."

In a brief, cold speech, Noah Crabtree summed up the evidence, and then gave the case to the jury.

The twelve men put their heads together for a few minutes of earnest discussion in undertones, then the foreman arose and delivered the verdict of guilty on all the counts. Then, as is frequently the case in Lynch courts, he pronounced the sentence agreed upon.

"We've talked the thing over atween us, an' we declar' that the pris'n'r shall be hung by the neck ontel he is dead, fer stealin' the hoss, robbin' Mr. Munro an' killin' Ben Townsley. But afore that, he shall be punished for stealin' the young lady away from her home, by bein' trussed up to a tree an' receivin' forty lashes save one on his naked back. An' may the Lord hev mercy on his pitiful no 'count soul—amen!"

A cry that was frightful in its fierce intensity burst from the lips of the prisoner as he heard this double sentence. He expected death, and had schooled his nerves to meet it as a bold man should, but the thoughts of the degrading lash in addition rendered him little better than a maniac for the time being.

With a strength that was superhuman, he burst his bonds asunder, and snarling like an enraged wolf, he leaped upon his enemies, unarmed as he was. And for a brief space it seemed as though he would prove the victor, despite the terrible odds. At every stroke of his fists, a man went down, stunned and bewildered. But then numbers prevailed; he was overpowered, his clothes torn from his back, after which he was dragged to a tree and bound fast to its trunk.

If before, any of the party had felt a trace of pity for the doomed wretch, none did so now. Nearly every one bore some marks of that brief but fearful struggle, and there was no lack of volunteers to ply the cruel whip, which one of the herdsmen procured from the ranch for the purpose of carrying out the sentence.

Cold and stern, Noah Crabtree stood beside the prisoner and faithfully counted the lashes. Blood followed every stroke, but not a sound came from the lips of the victim during his terrible punishment. He seemed an insensate statue of marble, only for his eyes. Those glowed like living coals, and more than one bold man shuddered and shrunk back as he met that burning gaze.

A lariat was noosed and thrown over a horizontal bough which overhung the river, and Will Wilder was cut loose from the tree, six stout men grasping him firmly, suspicious of his unnatural calmness.

As the noose was adjusted around his throat, and after Noah Crabtree had closed a brief prayer, the doomed man opened his lips and spoke:

"You have degraded and are about to murder an innocent man. Now listen to my dying oath. Whether I am bound for heaven or for hell, I swear that I will return to earth and never give over until I have had my revenge. I have marked you, one and all—"

He said no more, for Noah Crabtree moved his hand, and the doomed wretch was run up a dozen feet from the ground, dangling over the sullen waters.

In silence they watched him until all motion of the body ceased. Then Noah Crabtree fastened a card which he had prepared, to the trunk of the death tree.

And then, leaving the corpse hanging above the water the Vigilantes turned and left the motte, silently gliding away through the night.

CHAPTER V.

THE YOUNG MAN FROM BOSTON.

THOUGH Jack Gill struck a blow that well nigh equaled the force of a healthy mule's kick, hurling the young man from Boston at least a dozen feet away, that dandified-looking personage was far from being "knocked out of time." Bruised and somewhat bewildered he certainly was, but he would have scrambled to his feet, fit to fight for a kingdom, had not his assailant spoken just as he did.

Those words told Horace Treville that his bold game was foiled, at least for the present, and he lay still. Nor was he slain by the shot which Wolf fired. The bullet passed low, flattening against a rock under the young man's cheek, causing his head to lift spasmodically as the splinters of flint and particles of lead stung his face.

Luckily for him the outlaws did not pause to examine the work of their comrade, but cast the supposed corpse aside into the bushes without ceremony.

But the young man from Boston proved to be a very lively corpse before the work of that night was done.

He listened to the words uttered by Captain Moonshine, and knowing that his counterfeiting death would almost certainly be exposed when the time came for the road-agents to search him for valuables, he wisely stole away from the spot, betraying a coolness and skill in so doing that was truly remarkable.

Reason told him which course Captain Moonshine would be likely to follow, nor was he mistaken. The little cavalcade passed by the amateur scout so closely that by simply reaching out a hand, he could have patted any one of the six horses.

Lying low in his leafy covert until the riders had passed beyond eyesight, the young man from Boston arose and glided rapidly along the trail, guided by the sounds of iron-shod hoofs clattering upon the rocks and gravel.

Once or twice where the winding trail lengthened out in a straight stretch, the scout was obliged to crouch low in the moonlight, and almost crawl on his stomach. Yet he steadily maintained his distance, true as a veritable sleuth-hound on the scent.

His whole attention was not given to those in front, for he knew that by this time his disappearance must have been discovered by the main force of the outlaws, and he half expected to hear a wild rider hastening to bear the startling tidings to Captain Moonshine. But this misgiving was not realized, and Horace Treville was near enough when the party halted, to overhear the words uttered by the road-agent chief.

His eyes glittered and a strangely exultant look came over his handsome face as he crouched low in the shadow cast by a huge bowlder, while Captain Moonshine was blindfolding his captives. His expression was that of one who has unexpectedly stumbled upon some long and eagerly-sought-for treasure.

He saw Captain Moonshine carrying the form of Rachel Trowbridge in his arms, with as much apparent ease as though she had been an infant, lead the way into a narrow defile that opened up to the right. He saw two of the outlaws leading Ezra Blackwood, while the other twain followed in charge of the horses.

"The end must be near, else he would not be carrying her—delicious burden though it is!" muttered Treville, cautiously stealing after them.

He was right in this surmise. In a few minutes the men in charge of the horses came to a halt, and knotting their bridle-reins together, let the animals stand in the defile. Their bodies nearly filled this up, and cut off all view beyond. And with an annoyance that may be imagined, the scout saw one of the outlaws seat himself with his back supported against the high rock, leisurely filling and lighting his pipe.

The point where the horses stood was clearly lighted by the nearly full moon, and the pass was so narrow that not even a mouse could have stolen past the sentinel unseen, much less a man.

"So much the worse for him!" sternly breathed the young man from Boston. "I have taken too much trouble to be foiled now."

None but an unusually self-reliant man would have dared to even contemplate pressing the matter further. True, the guard could easily be brought down by a bullet, but that would alarm his fellows, and instantly bring them upon the scene. Thanks to the nakedness of that particular spot, added to the clear moonlight, it would be impossible to creep within twenty feet of the road agent without being discovered. A skillfully thrown knife might slay the fellow, but there was the risk of his uttering a death screech that would be fatal.

For a few moments the young man from Boston was sorely puzzled. Pass the guard he must, or else resign all hopes of rescuing Rachel Trowbridge.

"It's risky, but the only way I see," he muttered groping around in the shadows for a few moments, then slowly creeping nearer the road-agent.

Pausing when he dared venture no further, the young man from Boston silently rose to his

feet, a smooth round stone in his hand that would weigh some five or six pounds.

Swift as a meteor, the missile left this hand, hurled with the force and precision of a veteran base-ball player. With a sickening *thud* it struck the luckless wretch fairly on the side of the head. Without a groan he fell over, quivering in every limb like an ox beneath the ax of a butcher.

"Dead for a ducat!" muttered Treville, as he glided forward and bent over the body. "That was a little more than I intended, but he belonged to a band that has earned death ten thousand times over."

Catching the dead man by the heels, he dragged him back into the shadows, then removed the crape mask, hat, and long, disguising cloak, that, in common with his fellows, the road-agent had worn as a disguise. All these were quickly donned by the young man from Boston, who then stole forward and passed by the horses.

Confident in the completeness of his disguise, he boldly searched for the entrance to the cave which reason told him must be close at hand, and five minutes later he was inside, peering around the corner of rock upon the strange scene, just as Captain Moonshine was in the midst of his explanation to Rachel Trowbridge.

Eager to hear his words, Treville stole forward, favored by the friendly gloom, and drew near enough to overhear the concluding sentence. A better judge of human nature than the romantic girl, he felt sure that the road-agent was lying, the more surely to gain some evil end, and once again he registered a mental vow to do all he could to save her from the terrible snare into which she was so foolishly fluttering. But how? The odds were heavy; at least four to one, and he firmly believed the number would be five.

His were the eyes that eagerly photographed the face of Captain Moonshine during the brief space while the mask was raised.

During the strange scene which followed, he knew not how to act. The outspoken consent which Rachel Trowbridge gave, robbed him of all excuse for interfering.

"I know that she is being foully ensnared—that she is believing a lie—but while she so believes, she might not thank me for my interference. And yet it does not seem possible that I should have been so utterly mistaken in my first estimate of the girl!"

But his keen eyes noted the fact that had escaped all others; he saw that already Rachel was regretting the romantic impulse that led her to bind herself to an outlawed criminal. And when he saw Captain Moonshine signing the certificate, his last doubt vanished.

"I'd give a finger for one glance at that paper—and I'll have it, too!" he muttered, resolutely.

He it was who so rudely interrupted Captain Moonshine and his newly made bride. It was his hand that snatched away the important paper, his hard fist that struck the road-agent full in the throat, a moment after he had brushed the lamp from the table; and it was upon his strong arm that Rachel swooned with that one wild cry of terror.

At that moment a pistol exploded, the bullet whistling unpleasantly close to the daring man's ear as he swung the senseless maiden to his shoulder. And by the momentary flash, Horace Treville saw the face of Ezra Blackwood, horribly distorted with rage!

Nimble as a mountain cat, he leaped toward the narrow entrance, knowing that the stakes were life or death; but all behind him was confusion, worse confounded, by the abrupt extinction of all light.

With a quick gasp of relief, Treville found that he had made no miscalculation, and rushing out into the moonlighted pass, he severed the knotted bridles save two, and climbing into the saddle of one of these horses, still bearing the unconscious maiden upon his left arm, he urged the four horses before him down the pass.

The wisdom of this move was quickly evidenced.

Shouting and cursing, the outlaws emerged from the cavern just as he dashed away, and their revolvers began to speak rapidly.

With a swift movement, Treville swung Rachel around in front of him, thus protecting her person from the hissing bullets at the risk of his own life. But the horses were both willing and terrified, and left the howling ruffians far behind. A clear, taunting laugh was sent back to them as the fugitives passed around a sharp curve that effectually shielded them from the leaden storm.

"A pound of lead wasted, and not one drop of blood shed! Those fellows need a few lessons in marksmanship—and by the Lord! they'll get them, too, before many days roll by!"

He said no more, but turned his head quickly as a peculiar, hissing sound saluted his ears. And a grave shade came over his face as he caught sight of a rocket shooting far up toward the heavens.

"A signal to the men at the coach, no doubt!" he muttered, urging the two horses on still faster, as the unburdened animals were gradually

leaving him behind. "But there's more than one way out of this rock pile."

Less than a minute later he turned aside from the main trail, into a side gulch, riding more leisurely and shifting his fair burden to a more comfortable position as Rachel gave signs of returning consciousness.

Her recovery was rapid, and in a few well-chosen words, Treville made her understand the situation.

"Perhaps I should apologize for my actions," he added, half-laughingly, "but if you knew one-half the truth about this Captain Moonshine, you would sooner form an alliance with a rattlesnake or a corpse."

Rachel shuddered violently, and felt herself turning deathly sick as she reflected upon her fatal error. Free from the strange magnetic influence which the road-agent had exercised over her, she began to realize the full extent of her romantic folly.

Treville was silent, and Rachel felt grateful toward him for this consideration. And thus they rode on for some time in utter silence.

Then Rachel, feeling refreshed by the cool mountain air, was placed upon the led horse, and their flight resumed.

But few words were spoken. The nature of the events lately passed, rendered them both reticent.

Either the young man from Boston had been in that region before, or else he was endowed with a brain that was quick to decide and a will prompt to execute, for he never seemed at a loss which course to follow when the trail divided, or grew confused amid that wilderness of huge rocks.

Rachel, riding beside him, caught herself casting frequent glances up into his handsome face, and wondering who and what he was. True, she knew that he had been a fellow-passenger with her clear from Denver, and that he had since boldly risked his life in her behalf, but all beyond this was a mystery to her.

It seemed as though the young man had the power of reading her thoughts, for presently he said:

"I am your sincere friend, Miss Trowbridge; beyond that, for the present, at least, I must remain a man of mystery. Some day you may know more."

"See! yonder lights are in the windows of Grenada, and in ten minutes more you will be in perfect safety, so far as Captain Moonshine and his road-agents are concerned. I would that I could assure you that they are your worst enemies, but that would be false."

"I trust you will not deem me too presumptuous, if I tell you to be constantly on your guard: Do not trust *any* person implicitly, no matter how honest they may appear. And, above all, be on your guard against that man, *Ezra Blackwood*!"

Rachel stared at the speaker in open-eyed amazement.

"I know it is hard to believe evil of one whom you have known so long, and one in whom your father placed such confidence, but I solemnly declare that Ezra Blackwood is in league with Captain Moonshine in plotting against your fortune, if not your life itself. Trust me, and heed my warning, for at least a week. By that time I hope to be able to show you ample proof of all I now assert."

They were now on the outskirts of the town, and Treville drew rein, while hastily tracing some characters on the back of a card which he drew from an inner pocket.

For certain reasons which I cannot explain now, I must not be known as the man who brought you here. You see yonder red lamp? That burns before the door of the hotel, 'Golden Eagle,' kept by Enoch Dodge, the marshal of this town. Go there. Give him this card—but first be sure that it is *Dodge* himself. Tell no one who aided you to escape. Say as little of this night's work as possible. And, above all, beware of trusting Ezra Blackwood too far!"

As he concluded, the young man from Boston lifted her hand to his lips, and imprinted a respectful kiss upon it, then turned and rode rapidly away.

Half-dazed, Rachel rode slowly toward the red light, but before she reached it, an open saloon gave her light sufficient to read the name upon the card. That name was:

"DAN BROWN, OF DENVER."

CHAPTER VI.

THE CLOVEN HOOF.

THERE was no necessity for Rachel uttering a self-introduction as she rode up to the Golden Eagle, for almost ere she had drawn rein, a tall, gaunt man ran down the wooden steps and peered eagerly up into her face. That one glance beneath the red rays of the huge lamp seemed sufficient, for with a yell that would have done credit to a Cheyenne brave on the war-trail, the man lifted her from the saddle and ran up the steps with his astonished burden.

"Go hunt up the old man, Jim," he cried to a man who came forward at his shout. "Tell him that the lost sheep o' Israel hes come back

ag'in—that the lady is here, safe an' sound an' right side— Why in thunder don't ye peel out when I tell ye?"

Rachel hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry, to be amused or frightened. For the third time that night—and it was not yet midnight!—she was borne helplessly along in the arms of a stranger, powerless to resist.

Into the hotel, across the bar-room—there uttering a glad shout that was echoed back by the few men present—and into the parlor the gaunt fellow bore the maiden, depositing her upon a dingy sofa with the tenderness of a father caring for a sick child. Then he dashed back to the saloon, and Rachel heard him confounding the bar-keeper with a dozen conflicting orders, the gist of which was that some powerful but dainty refreshment was wanted for the poor lady.

As Rachel half-suspected, this queer creature was none other than the man to whom the mysterious "Dan Brown, of Denver," had directed her, and a nobler heart never beat in the bosom of living man, despite its uncouth shell. Enoch Dodge fairly worshiped the opposite sex—when at a distance! To come into close contact with them was to render himself supremely ridiculous. Then he was nervous and timid. But, take him among men, he was chief. Strong as a wild bull, fearless as a grizzly bear, lithe and active as a panther, while possessing few equals with fire-arms or cold steel, a better marshal for the lively town of Grenada, nestling down on the edge of the foothills, with a particularly "fun-loving" population, would have been hard to find.

Reaching this conclusion, Rachel thrust one hand in the pocket where she had placed the card given her by her mysterious knight, but at that moment Ezra Blackwood rushed into the room and clasped her in his arms. The lawyer was in a state of excitement very unusual for him, and in that warm embrace vanished whatever faint suspicion might have been aroused by the earnest words of her rescuer.

Hurriedly, almost incoherently, Ezra Blackwood explained how he contrived to escape.

Thrown into intense confusion by the audacious rescue, the road-agents paid no attention to his movements, but after sending up the warning rocket, they hastened, led by Captain Moonshine, down the pass, guided by the receding sound of hoof-strokes. He, Blackwood, followed as closely as he dared, until they were met by the main force of road-agents, having four of the stampeded horses in charge. A brief consultation made it clear that the fugitives must have diverged from the main gulch, and separating into half a dozen squads, the outlaws struck off in hot search.

This left the coast clear for Blackwood, who soon after reached the spot where the coach had been halted. Both this and passengers were gone, and he could only follow the trail on foot. This he did, safely arriving at Grenada, where he at once set about organizing a force to set out in quest of his beloved ward.

"He jist hopped around like a bed-bug on a hot griddle," declared Enoch Dodge, pressing a glass of "something warmin'" on the lady. "But, whar's the man as sot ye free? I jist want to grip his hand—jist once!"

Rachel uttered a little cry as she felt in her pocket.

"He gave me a card, with his name and some secret writing on it—but I fear I have lost it," she said, anxiously. "It was of importance—I was to give it to you—to Mr. Dodge of the Golden Eagle."

"Mebbe it fell out when I tuck ye off the hoss," spluttered Dodge, hastening out of the room.

But he speedily returned, in disappointment, having failed to find the missing card. And little wonder; for, at that very moment the card of "Dan Brown, of Denver," rested in the breast pocket of Ezra Blackwood!

In drawing forth her handkerchief, Rachel had unwittingly dropped the card upon the floor, and at her first mention of it, the lawyer noticed the bit of paste-board lying on the carpet close to his feet. With a quick movement he placed one broad sole upon it, and during the brief search which was instituted, he managed to get it into his possession, wholly unsuspected.

Agitated and flustered by the loss, Rachel for the moment forgot the earnest warning of her mysterious friend, and in answer to the eager questions of the marshal, she pronounced the name she had read upon the card.

Enoch Dodge started to his feet in great excitement, his eyes glowing, his strongly marked features working under the influence of some powerful emotion. But he clapped one broad palm over his lips, and managed to choke back the excited speech that struggled for utterance.

"Who and what is this 'Dan Brown, of Denver?' You seem to recognize the name," uttered Blackwood, curiously.

"Never hearn tell o' the critter afore," declared Dodge, with a sickly smile. "I sot my foot onto a pin or a tack, I reckon," and with this transparent evasion, he turned and precipitately left the room.

The lawyer smiled grimly, and gave a short, defiant nod as the marshal vanished. He did

not care much. He believed he held the solution of the mystery in the card which he had so adroitly secured.

But then he began fidgeting in his seat. There was one point of information which he lacked, and he hardly knew how to set about it. Finally concluding to lead up to it gradually, he began questioning his ward concerning her escape and how it was contrived.

Though she firmly believed that her rescuer was at fault in his doubts concerning the integrity of her guardian, Rachel, realizing that she had made a mistake in forgetting his warning even so far, now made ample amends for her former indiscretion. She gave the story of the rescue and the wild night ride which followed, truly enough, but not one hint would she drop as to the identity of her mysterious friend.

"He was a stranger to me," she said, wearily. "I do not know where he went when he left me."

"Did—that is, I suppose you have the certificate of marriage?" asked Blackwood, his eyes glittering, his yellow face turning greenish with strong anxiety as he put the question.

"No, I have not seen it since; but, why torture me by forcing me to speak of that dreadful time? I will not talk—I will not even think of it!" she cried, passionately, then buried her face upon the sofa pillow, sobbing and moaning like some grieved and weary child.

Ezra Blackwood wisely left her alone, and as Mrs. Dodge, a genial, motherly woman of middle age, at that moment knocked at the door, he begged her to care for his ward.

"She needs quiet and rest, poor thing—and no wonder! I will get her to bed and give her a composing draught," said the good-hearted landlady.

Hurriedly thanking her, the lawyer passed out into the bar-room. Enoch Dodge was not visible, but as Blackwood appeared, a young man approached him with outstretched hand and smiling countenance.

"I hastened here as soon as I heard of your arrival, father. I hardly knew whether I would find you alive or dead, there are so many wild rumors afloat. You must have had a lively introduction to our fast life."

The speaker looked younger than his years, which were some thirty and odd. Though he addressed the lawyer as a son, there was hardly a point of similarity between them in either form or features.

Frank Blackwood, attorney-at-law, as his shingle, which had creaked in Grenada for nearly a year, read, was a little above the medium height, and one who would have been called handsome by the majority of women. His features were small and irregular, his nose having a slight upward tilt at the tip. His hair and long drooping mustache were of a light, flaxen hue. His eyes were the best feature about him, being large, and of a dark blue color. His dress was slightly "loud," and he sported rather too much jewelry to be in strictly good taste; but all of it was genuine.

After a few more words, he took his father's arm and led him from the room, out into the street. In a few minutes they were seated in a cosy room, over a grocery store, directly opposite a large and brilliantly lighted building, clearly a saloon of some sort.

"Well, you have seen her; what does she say?" the younger man asked abruptly, after cigars were lighted.

"More than I care to repeat or you to hear. I fancy she let out rather more than she intended, for at the last she turned crusty and fell to crying—the true woman's dodge."

"Did you learn who it was that carried her off? He suspected one of the pilgrims—a dandified young fellow—"

"Tell me who is 'Dan Brown, of Denver?'"

Frank Blackwood sprung to his feet with an oath.

"Not he—bah! I am a fool! the fellow is dead and eaten by worms long before this!"

"That isn't answering my question," persisted the lawyer.

"A devil, a veritable bloodhound, who never struck a trail without following it to the death, until he took up one that led to his own grave, more than a year ago. I had a hidden finger in that pie, and I never knew what it was to feel safe, until he was killed. As a detective, I don't believe he had an equal. Shrewd, cunning and quick-witted, able to disguise himself so that his own mother would fail to recognize him, a perfect master of all weapons, and absolutely ignorant of what the word fear means—there, in brief, you have a description of what Dan Brown of Denver was."

"And of what he is, or else some one has stepped into his shoes and assumed his name," said Ezra Blackwood, handing his son the card which Rachel had lost.

Frank struck a match—for they were sitting without lights—and read the legend printed on the bit of pasteboard.

"The original is dead—must be dead—yet this fellow will have to be attended to, or he may make us trouble. But about the certificate? Has Rachel got it?"

"She says not; says she has not seen it since that cursed fellow interfered—if my bullet had

only bored his brain! But, has not your friend got it in his possession?"

"No. I met him—Captain Moonshine—in town not ten minutes before I found you. He swears that the paper was snatched out of his hand just before he was knocked down. Either Rachel was lying, or else this counterfeit Dan Brown has got it."

"Is it so important, then?" asked the lawyer, anxiously. "Surely he didn't sign your name to the paper?"

"No; it was agreed that he should sign in his own name—for of course 'Moonshine' is only a part of his road disguise," laughed the younger man.

"You have only trusted me half-way," said Blackwood, coldly, "but I don't complain. With what light I have, I believe I can see a fatal flaw in your arrangements. That certificate is the only legal proof that Rachel is married, and Captain Moonshine's real name is the one inserted there as her lawful husband. The prize is an enormous one. What security have you that he will not play us false—that he will not have his men murder us, and then put forward his claims?"

"The security of a bond which he cannot, dare not break. I hold Captain Moonshine and his band in the hollow of my hand. They are mere puppets, to dance as I choose to pull the wires."

"As for my not trusting you wholly, you shall have no further cause of complaint. I said no more than was strictly necessary, because I felt that failure was possible. Now it is different. All that is lacking is the certificate. Then we will have plain sailing."

"Rachel is legally married; that you will readily admit. On her demise, her property—over a million dollars—will fall to her husband. And, though I have not seen the young lady for several years, I feel confident that her health is delicate. This brisk mountain air will prove too powerful for her lungs. I fear she will not live to see the beginning of another month."

Despite his well-hardened heart, Ezra Blackwood could not refrain from shuddering at these words, cold and deadly, dropped deliberately from his son's lips.

Frank laughed mockingly as he noted this.

"The time for squeamishness is past, old gentleman. A round million is not to be won every day. Besides, I only plan; my good friend Beverley Brownell executes. For ten thousand dollars cash, on the day we come into possession, and certain documents which I know where to put my fingers upon, he relieves us of all the dirty work."

"Your part is simple. You will carry out the original programme, taking Rachel to Noah Crabtree's ranch. Then you can leave as soon as you like, and be out of the way when the final touch is put to the business."

"Rachel is a dear, good girl—why not alter your plans?" said Ezra Blackwood, eagerly.

"That marriage can be broken. Then she will be free. You can make her fall in love with you, can marry her, when the fortune will be ours without the necessity of doing murder."

"Thanks for your high opinion of my powers of fascination," drawled Frank, throwing the end of his cigar out at the open window. "But, unfortunately, there is an obstacle in the way—or rather two of them. I already have a wife and a child!"

Most thoroughly amazed was Ezra Blackwood at this unexpected announcement, but he could see that his son was in sober earnest, despite his flippant air.

There was a scowl upon the young man's brow as he stared out of the window, but this changed to a look of deadly rage as he beheld a man pause before the lighted building opposite; a man whom we have seen before, for it was Horace Treville, the young man from Boston!

"Dan Brown of Denver! by the eternal! he shall die!" hissed Frank Blackwood, drawing a revolver, cocking it and taking deadly aim at the unsuspecting man opposite!

CHAPTER VII.

CROWDING A TENDERFOOT.

THE street was so narrow, and the light against which the man's form was thrown into relief was so clear, that the career of the "young man from Boston," be he the celebrated Rocky Mountain detective or not, would almost certainly have ended then and there, only for the prompt interference of Ezra Blackwood.

With an angry ejaculation he grasped the hand of his infuriated son, and caught the hammer of the revolver upon his palm as it fell. In a stern voice he uttered:

"Are you mad? Would you ruin everything and throw away our lives into the bargain? Such an open attempt could not be disguised. We would be charged with the murder. The mob would rise and tear us limb from limb. Or even at the best—if we should escape lynch law, yonder man is a particular friend of Enoch Dodge, the marshal—and I'd as lieve have a wild tiger after me as that fellow."

Swiftly-spoken as were these sharp sentences, they gave Frank Blackwood time to realize that

his father was right, but it was not in his nature to either return thanks where due, or acknowledge his errors.

"You have saved the hound for the present; he has gone into the 'Shades.' If he ever comes out alive, it will be because I have forgotten to plot and execute. Go down-stairs the way we came and watch the saloon yonder."

As he spoke the young man almost pushed Ezra Blackwood from the room, but never removing his eyes from the door which his hated enemy had passed through. Then, too impatient to wait, or afraid to fully trust his parent, he passed out of the window upon the stout wooden awning, and dropped from its lower edge into the street, where he was quickly rejoined by Ezra Blackwood.

"Watch that place closely. If our game comes out, follow him to a stopping-place, if it takes you all night. Make sure that he is settled for good, then return here for me. I believe that hound has the certificate, and have that we must, though a dozen lives stand between."

The veteran lawyer was somewhat flustered by the many startling changes of that eventful night, but he promised to keep faithful guard, and with a parting caution that their very lives might depend upon his coolness and vigilance, Frank Blackwood turned and hastened down the street.

Three minutes of swift walking carried him to the place he was so anxious to reach; a long, low, wooden structure in the most disreputable portion of the town.

Hastily entering the saloon—that and restaurant combined—as the painted windows announced—Frank Blackwood cast a swift glance around the low-ceiled, smoke-obscured room. There was a quick glow in his eyes as they rested upon two men seated at a table near by, smoking and drinking over a game of cards, but there was nothing else to show that these men were the real object of his hurried journey hither; but such was the fact.

He called for a glass of brandy, and while sipping it leisurely, made a covert signal with his free hand. He knew that it had been seen and understood, and paying for the liquor, he left the building.

His patience was not severely tested. In less than two minutes the two evil-browed men followed and joined him. A swift glance around them showed that the street was deserted, and that he might speak without being overheard by ears other than those for which his words were intended.

"Captain Moonshine told me where you might be found, in case any necessity arose for your services. There is a little job on hand, which will net you each a double eagle, if you play your parts well, besides greatly benefiting the 'family.' You are ready to undertake it?"

"The boss has told us time an' ag'in that we was to mind you jest as we would him. Spit out what you want, an' ef two good boys kin do it, count it done," was the prompt response of the larger outlaw, known in Grenada as Bruiser Bill, from his prowess as a pugilist.

In a few words as possible Blackwood told them what they were to do; to enter the 'Shades' and somehow pick a quarrel with the young man from Boston. They were to make sure work, even if they had to "double-bank" him. He must not live to witness the dawn of a new day.

"The safety of the band requires it," he added, earnestly. "Your man is the same fellow who stole away the girl from the 'home.' If he lives until to-morrow, he will lead the Vigilantes, or old Dodge's posse to the cave—"

"I'll double him across my knee an' break his back," blustered Bruiser Bill, but with full confidence in his power to carry out the threat.

"Don't be too sure; he is chain lightning, from the captain's account. Take all the advantage you can."

Though he knew that his men were bold and reckless as the usual run of ruffians who live by the pistol and knife, Blackwood did not dare tell them who the young man from Boston really was. The reputation of Dan Brown, of Denver, won in many a desperate battle against long odds, was well known to them, and he feared the knowledge would unnerve them. Having said all that he dared, he led them back to the spot where Ezra Blackwood was still on guard.

"He has not shown himself since," was the lawyer's report.

"Go in, then, and mind my warning. Strike swift and sure. But if you fail, remember your oath. My agency must not be suspected in this work," added Frank Blackwood, impressively.

The ruffians nodded, and pausing only to assure themselves that their weapons were in readiness for the use they expected to make of them, they crossed the street and entered the brilliantly lighted room.

The "Shades" was the most fashionable as well as reputable resort of the sporting class of Grenada. A stylish looking bar occupied the space nearest the door. Beyond, ranged on each side of the long, wide room, were faro tables, roulette, monte and other gambling 'lay-outs,' all being liberally patronized, the apart-

ment containing at least one hundred men, from the broadclothed, bejeweled gambler, to the miner in rough and mud covered garments.

Both Bruiser Bill and his mate, Bricktop, were members of Captain Moonshine's band of road-agents, and having been among the party that stopped the coach, they had little difficulty in "spotting" their game. Dressed as he had been when first introduced to the reader, with the exception of his head wear, the young man from Boston was now seated at one of the faro tables, busily playing, with all the coolness and foresight of a veteran gambler.

Bruiser Bill gave a grunt of satisfaction as he saw who was the dealer at that particular table, for he knew that he had nothing to fear from his interference with the little scheme he had hastily formed in his mind.

A muttered word prepared his mate for what was coming, and then they both crowded their way to the table, the spectators silently putting up with their rudeness, when they recognized the intruders. Both Bruiser Bill and Bricktop had a well-earned reputation of being "bad medicine," and there were few present who would have cared to cross them in an ugly mood, as now.

"Keep whar ye kin make a break fer the door," muttered one cautious individual to his particular friend. "They's goin' to be music here afore long, you hear me!"

Pressing forward, Bruiser Bill leaned one hand heavily upon the shoulder of Horace Treville as he flung a five-dollar bill across the table to the cashier, calling for checks.

A quick flush passed over the face of the young man at this unnecessary rudeness, and for a moment it seemed as though he was going to resent it. But as he glanced up and backward, meeting the ugly, leering look of the hairy-faced giant, the flush died quickly away, and his eyes drooped suddenly.

Bill received his chips, but in drawing back his hand, dropped them upon the goodly pile which lay before his intended victim. With an oath, his huge paw closed upon the ivory bits, grasping not only his own property, but more than double the amount besides.

At this bare-faced robbery, there was a low murmur from among the players, and Bruiser bristled up fiercely.

"Mebbe some o' you critters think I tuck more'n I dropped? Mebbe you do, pilgrim?" at the same time bending down until his bristly beard almost touched the face of Horace Treville. "Ef so, spit it out!"

"Your word to the contrary is quite sufficient, my dear sir," slowly responded the young man, his face turning white as though it had been painted.

There was another murmur, but with a very different cadence. Though there was not a man present but what would have dreaded a personal encounter with the redoubtable bruiser, this exhibition of what they deemed arrant cowardice, thoroughly disgusted them.

Bruiser Bill was scarcely less annoyed. From the description given by Frank Blackwood, he had believed this audacious stroke would bring on a collision, and its failure nonplused him.

For a few minutes he played carelessly, and by the time the deal was ended, his chips were gone to help swell the pile in the cashier's box. He bought no more, though still maintaining his position beside Treville.

The latter was playing steadily, with varying fortunes. The appearance of Bruiser Bill having seemingly broken his former "streak of luck," or, as more believed, he had lost his skill with his courage.

It was not long before the giant ruffian made a new attempt to bring about the desired end.

"Nobody but a baby or a durned fool would bet that-a-way," he uttered in a tone of supreme disgust, as Treville placed a few chips upon the queen, at the commencement of a fresh deal. "Why in blazes don't ye 'copper' the jack?" and as he spoke he extended his brawny hand and altered the bet to correspond.

Even the dealer, usually cold as an iceberg, and about as easily moved while on duty, paused in slipping the cards from the silver box, and looked at the young man from Boston. And every other eye around the table was turned upon that white countenance.

Bruiser Bill quickly drew back his hand after shifting the chips, and clasped the butt of a revolver, expecting an instant explosion. But he as well as the others were disappointed.

In a low voice that perceptibly quavered, Treville said:

"Your judgment may be better than mine. Let the game go on, and we will see how it turns out."

This time there were words audible amid the murmur; words cutting enough to have made almost any coward turn in fury or else slink away in search of some spot in which to hide his shame-covered head.

But the young man from Boston sat motionless as a statue of marble, which his white face strongly resembled; his blue eyes riveted upon the cards which the dealer was slowly slipping out of the silver case.

A dozen cards were drawn, then came the one that made the coppered jack a winner.

"Your judgment was better than mine, I admit," said Treville, softly, as he received his winnings. "I am much obliged to you for your kind advice. I am a novice at the game, and don't understand it very well."

"Waal, fer up an' down cheek, stranger, you kin discount any government mule as ever slung a hoof!" roared Bruiser Bill, urged on to "crowd" the "tenderfoot" still harder, by his seeming pusillanimity. "I don't know what it may be whar you come from, but out yer we call it *stealin'* to rake in another critter's bet."

A hot flush swept over the young man's face, leaving it more deathly white than before. And there was a sharper ring in his voice as he spoke again:

"Will you be so kind as to explain your meaning more clearly?"

"Don't I speak plain enough English? I say that I putt yender chips on the winnin' keerd, an' consekintly the chips is mine. An', whar is mine, I'm ready to fight fer—you hear me!" angrily retorted the pugilist.

"You shifted my bet from the queen to the jack," said the young man from Boston, speaking slowly and with an evident effort. "That does not alter the ownership of the chips, since you acted without authority—"

"I kerry my 'thority in my belt," blurted out the ruffian.

"I am willing to leave the dispute to any of these gentlemen," continued Treville, "and whatever they decide, I will agree to abide by. You, sir," turning to the dealer, "can settle the question by one word. Who do the chips belong to: this gentleman or myself?"

"Settle the muss between yourselves. I've got enough to attend to in my dealing," was the cold response.

"The chips is Bill's—any fool knows that!" put in Bricktop, pressing forward close to the disputants. "We don't want no durned, dandified stink-bottles on two legs comin' 'round yer pickin' a muss with honest gentlemen. Pick up your own, Bill, old feller!"

"Which you bet I'm goin' to do!" grinned that worthy, his huge paws fastening upon the ivory counters.

It was an unlucky move for him. The young man from Boston cried out in a clear, ringing voice:

"Take this change with the rest, you ruffianly brutes!"

One—two lightning-like strokes, and the two outlaws were knocked headlong through the excited crowd!

CHAPTER VIII. A DOUBLE DUEL.

LIKE frightened sheep on the advent of a hungry wolf, the crowd separated and scattered in every direction, knowing from experience that hot and deadly work must of a surety follow such knock-down arguments. And they knew, too, that bullets were no respecters of persons on occasions like the present promised to be.

Large and heavy men though they were—one of them a veritable giant—and though the young man from Boston used nothing save his naked fists, both Bruiser Bill and Bricktop were raised clear from the floor and hurled endlong more than their own length away. And then, his face paler than ever, but with a dangerous devil glowing in his steel blue eyes, Horace Treville whipped forth a pair of short derringers, each carrying a half ounce ball.

"Make way, gentlemen! I have been crowded enough for one evening. Elbow-room, here! By the Lord of Israel! I'll bore the brain of the first man that dares to interfere between me and those two hounds!"

The scattered crowd drew back still further. The complete and startling change that had come over the "tenderfoot," whom but a few moments before they were scorning as a white-livered craven, awed them more than did the black-muzzled derringers. He looked more like a tiger in a white-heat rage than a coward.

Confused, half stunned, their brains whirling dizzily, the two ruffians scrambled to their feet, glaring unsteadily around them, seemingly unable to realize what had occurred. Possibly the first thought was of an earthquake. But they were not left long in doubt as to what was likely to happen.

"Hold! stand as you are! Another step forward, or the first attempt to draw a weapon will be the signal for scattering your brains over the floor!"

Sharp and clear as the notes of a silver bell rung out the words, and the peril which they recognized did more than aught else to sober the ruffians and clear their obfuscated senses. The earnest cautions of their employer were remembered now, when it was too late to profit by them. Truly this pilgrim was "chain lightning."

Their lives were wholly at his mercy. He had the drop on them, and swift as might be their actions, he could send a half-ounce bullet home to the heart or brain of each before they could strike a blow in self-defense.

"No row in this establishment, gentlemen," cried the owner of the Shades, who had been standing behind the bar when these two blows

were struck. "If you can't get along without fighting, have the kindness to adjourn into the street. I mean business, and I can snuff a candle at a thousand yards."

Leaning against the walnut counter, which supported one elbow, the speaker leveled a cocked Winchester rifle.

The spectators drew a long breath of mingled relief and disappointment, for they believed that the impending "circus" was nipped in the bud by this interference. The rifleman, Billy Ullman, was known as a man of his word, who would shoot and fight at the "drop of a hat."

A low laugh broke from the lips of the young man from Boston, as he noted the glad light that sprung up in the eyes of his two antagonists, but his weapons were not lowered at the command as they expected.

How this "dead-lock" would have terminated, had the parties been left to themselves, can only be surmised, but, at that moment, the door opened and a man hastily entered the saloon. A single glance showed him the situation, and with a swift bound his bony fingers closed upon the rifle-barrel and turned the muzzle toward the ceiling.

"Don't you be so durned keerless, Billy. Tain't white man fashion to plug a feller-critter in the back with a chunk o' lead. Put up your shooter—*quick!*"

There was not another man in Grenada, if in all Colorado, who would have done this without having his mettle immediately tested by Ullman; but now the gambler made no resistance, and turned white as death before the angry glitter that filled the eyes of Enoch Dodge.

"I was just persuading them to go outside if they *must* fight," he muttered, apologetically. "But now you have come, it will be all right."

Without noticing the implied compliment, the city marshal advanced to where the three men confronted each other.

"Picking another muss, Bill Bruiser? Some o' these fine days you'll git unmercifully salivated. Bein' it's you an' seein' how the stranger is runnin' things, I'm 'most sorry I came in, fer the town wouldn't go in mournin' over *your* corpse. Sorry to interfere with your amusement, stranger—Waal, I ber-durned!"

For the first time he obtained a fair view of Treville's countenance, and as the concluding words dropped slowly from his lips, the doubting expression was chased from his eyes by a look of strong, heartfelt pleasure.

With a glad cry that was almost a sob he grasped the right hand of the young man in his, while his throat worked convulsively as though he was trying to speak and couldn't.

Fancying his time was come while the "tenderfoot" was thus hampered, and feeling that there was no hope of his carrying out orders as long as the marshal was present, Bruiser Bill started for the door; but, quick as were his motions, he had to deal with one still more active in the young man from Boston.

Twisting his hand from those of Dodge, Treville leaped before the bully. Just how it was done, no one could say, but all that was visible was an interposed foot and a push of the right arm, then the pugilist fell heavily upon his back, shaking the building, causing the glass-ware to jingle and the lights to dance by the force of his fall.

While performing this feat, the derringers had vanished from view, but before Bruiser could arise, or Bricktop interfere, they once more occupied the hands of the young man, who was undeniably master of the situation.

In vain Dodge expostulated with him, in undertones. Treville was wrought up to a white heat, and obstinately refused to listen to reason.

"They began crowding me from the very first," he said, in a cold, hard tone that spoke louder than an outburst of fury. "I treated them like gentlemen, and yielded them every point, until the crowd were nearly ready to mob me for my supposed cowardice. At last they went too far. I gave them a little odd change, and now I mean to pay off their debt in full. But, they shall have a fair shake. Let them name their tools: anything from fists to rifles. As for you, friend Dodge, if your official dignity will not allow you to witness the circus, oblige me by taking a little walk around the square, for exercise."

This speech created a sensation, particularly the latter portion of it, for the interested crowd looked to see Enoch Dodge annihilate the audacious young man.

Instead, his opposition entirely ceased, and he at once began arrangements for the "circus," declaring that the city fathers might decapitate him in the morning, but that night he was bound to see his friend have a "fair shake."

Neither Bruiser Bill nor his mate were exactly satisfied with the turn matters had taken, but they dared not show the white feather or attempt any foul play.

Confident in his enormous strength and really fair knowledge of scientific boxing, added to his gluttonous capability of receiving punishment, Bruiser Bill named nature's weapons as his choice.

Dodge was plainly anxious, but Treville coolly nodded him to go ahead and complete arrangements.

A "squared circle" was speedily formed by drawing various tables into position, and with the understanding that the combat was to be governed by the revised rules of the London Prize Ring, the two pugilists stripped and entered the ring.

Enoch Dodge first double-locked the doors, then made a little speech. The battle was to be decided upon the merits of the two men, and any attempt at foul play, either in or outside the ring, would promptly be cut short by a bullet from his revolver. And, standing upon one of the tables which formed the ring, where he could overlook everything, he called "time!"

As the antagonists confronted each other in that contracted space, the disparity between their size and weight became almost painfully apparent. Half a foot taller, fifty pounds heavier, with arms at least two inches the longest, Bruiser Bill seemed able to crush the life out of his lithe adversary at the first collision. And though his bold demeanor, ever since delivering those two knockdown blows had entirely changed the sympathies of the crowd to his side, Treville saw how low his chances of winning were estimated. Ten to one was offered freely on Bruiser Bill, by those who did not allow their private feelings to sway their gambling propensities.

These odds were temporarily lowered by Enoch Dodge, who called to Ullman and bade him accept every bet offered at those odds, in his name. But no one purse could compete with fifty, and Bruiser Bill was still a hot favorite in the betting when the first blow was struck.

It is not my intention to give a literal report of that bitterly contested struggle. Enough that Bruiser Bill more than made good his reputation as a pugilist of fair science, bull-dog courage and remarkable ability to withstand punishment. But in the young man from Boston he met a phenomenon. Quick as the plain lightning Frank Blackwood had likened him to; a magnificent two-handed fighter with a guard that was absolutely perfect; a temper under perfect control, and a courage that nothing could daunt, Horace Treville forced the fighting from the first, planting his blows straight from the shoulder with unerring precision and a force that speedily reduced the liquor-bloated countenance of his antagonist to a mask of blood. In only one respect did the bruiser display his superiority. His enormous strength more than counterbalanced the other's skill as a wrestler, thanks to the circumscribed space in which they were obliged to fight. A few trials convinced them both of this, and then, while Bruiser lent all his energies to clenching and throwing his man, hoping thus to wind and exhaust him by adding his own weight to the shock of the fall, Treville, when he could no longer stall off the rush of the giant, yielded easily, in preference to using up his strength in striving for the fall.

After the first half-hour, the victory became only a question of time. Completely blinded, owing to his being cut out of condition, Bruiser Bill was knocked from pillar to post, his agile opponent dexterously eluding his blind rushes. The giant took a vast deal of beating, but finally a desperate upper cut fairly lifted him from the floor, and when he fell his head and shoulders striking first, he lay there quivering, unable to respond to the prompt call of "time," a whipped and horrible looking object.

Flushed and panting from his great exertion, the young man from Boston scarcely listened to the joyful congratulations of Enoch Dodge, but glanced around in quest of Bricktop, his eyes flashing anew as he discovered that worthy hard by.

Reckless and desperate though the outlaw was, when he saw how marvelously his intended victim performed with such a man as Bruiser Bill, he would have stuck away during the fight, had not the doors been locked and the eye of Enoch Dodge overlocking all. But now, as he met that glittering stare, telling him plainly that his turn was coming now, he made the best of a bad situation.

Bidding Dodge make the necessary arrangements with his second foe, and flatly refusing to listen to any suggestion of either delay or compromise, the young man from Boston washed his hands and sponged off his head, face and body to the waist in cold water.

When this was done, it was seen that he bore not a trace of his desperate struggle with Bruiser Bill on his face; a few bruises and abrasions of the skin on his body, the results of his falls, being the only marks.

"The critter chooses revolvers, thinkin' your hands may be csteaded by what you've got through," reported Dodge.

"There'll be a funeral in town to-morrow, then," laughed Treville, hardly. "These two belong to the band of Captain Moonshine, and crowded me, thinking to put a dangerous ice out of the way. But, I reckon they struck a little surprise party instead of a soft snap."

"Ef he's one o' that gang, durned ef I don't run him in myself!" cried Dodge, eagerly snapping at the chance of sparing his young friend further danger.

"Then you'll have to stand up in his place," uttered Treville, more than half in earnest. "I have sworn to read them a lesson, and to

clean them out with their own tools, and the man who tries to hinder me from keeping that oath, is my enemy."

Those who overheard this skirmish of words were amazed by the manner in which Dodge, a renowned fire-eater himself, accepted the situation thrust upon him, yielding to the will of the other without a remonstrance.

The marshal turned away and held a brief consultation with the chosen second of Bricktop. A crack shot, the latter had determined to make sure work, and named the width of the room as the distance, each man to stand upon a table and fire at the word.

The crowd hailed this decision with shouts of approval. By it, all could see, without running the risk of being hit by a bullet that might miss its mark.

Both principals were eager to have the matter settled, and with little delay they took up their positions, revolvers in hand.

In a clear, sharp tone, Enoch Dodge gave the signal.

At the word, Horace Treville fired, but every one present saw that the other pistol had snapped without exploding.

Without a groan, Bricktop toppled forward, shot through the brain; a moment later Horace Treville also reeled and fell with a heavy crash!

There had been only one report heard, but a jingle of broken glass guided all eyes to the door, where a curl of smoke was distinctly visible. A second shot had been discharged by some person standing outside the building, and it was this bullet that laid the young man from Boston low!

"Out an' ketch the murderer!" screamed Enoch Dodge, himself leaping to the side of his friend. "Five hundred dollars fer the cuss, dead or alive!"

In an instant the saloon was cleared, with yells of vengeance.

CHAPTER IX.

A NOCTURNAL VISITOR.

THE second floor of the Golden Eagle was composed almost entirely of sleeping apartments, and for several hours had been unusually still and tranquil; but then a remarkable event occurred.

A wide corridor extended from the front to the rear of the building, with the doors of the sleeping-rooms opening at regular intervals on either side. At each end and the center of this corridor, oil lamps depended from the ceiling, now burning with a half-light.

Without a sound one of the doors opened, and the head of a man protruded, looking to the right and left as though to make sure that the coast was clear. His body followed and with a light, agile step, he passed from one lamp to the other, turning the wick so low that but a faint glow was perceptible, leaving the hall in almost total darkness.

This done, the stealthy prowler partially retraced his steps, pausing before a door, but not that of the room from whence he had first appeared. For several minutes his hands were busy, but the gloom appeared to bother the prowler, and a momentary gleam was admitted from a small dark lantern that was attached to his button-hole. By this light it could be seen that he was manipulating the lock of the room, and a few moments later he was successful, the bolt noiselessly falling back.

Slowly the door opened inwardly, the manipulator listening as though his life depended upon the acuteness of his hearing. But no sounds came from within save the barely perceptible one of some one breathing.

A faint light was shed by a lamp within the room, and as soon as the door was opened sufficiently for the purpose, the burglar thrust his head inside, his glittering eyes roving swiftly over the contents of the small apartment.

As is the case in all hotels of small towns throughout the West, the chamber, though so small, looked bare and cheerless. Bedstead, washstand and several chairs formed the whole of its furniture, now added to by the two trunks which Rachel Trowbridge had brought with her from St. Louis—for this room was the one assigned her, and she was now lying asleep in the uncanopied bed, unconscious of the evil gaze that was riveted upon her.

Satisfied that she was soundly sleeping, the burglar entered the room, closing the door behind him and turning the key in the lock.

This done, his first move was to place one of the chairs beside the bed, and lay upon it several articles, among them a sponge and a three-ounce bottle marked poison. Then he paused, and for a few moments gazed gloatingly upon the unconscious girl whose face, slightly flushed by the warmth of the room, was now almost bewilderingly lovely.

What his emotions, could only be surmised from the red light that filled his dark eyes, for all the rest of his features were hidden by a thick crape mask, while his form was shrouded in the long coat with cape, cut something after the style of the cavalry overcoat worn by the "boys in blue" throughout the late civil war.

There was a powerful magnetism in those lustreous eyes, but in this case it worked contrary

to the will of their owner. All at once, without any warning flutter, Rachel's eyelids unclosed and she gazed full into the threatening orbs that were bent upon her.

Quick as a flash one palm of the burglar was pressed firmly over her lips, and in a low, grating tone he said:

"Utter a cry or attempt to give the alarm in any way, and you are a dead woman—I will drive my knife to your heart without a moment's hesitation. Be sensible and no injury shall be done you."

At almost any other time, Rachel would have acted like the vast majority of women, and have fainted dead away from terror, but the strange scenes through which she had that night passed, lent her a courage or desperation foreign to her usual sunny nature. And her small white teeth nearly met in the flesh of the burglar's palm.

A hissing curse parted his lips, and his bared knife was pressed to her fair throat until the keen point indented the soft white flesh.

"Unlock your teeth, or I'll slit your throat from ear to ear! I repeat that I don't mean you any harm, unless you bring it on yourself by being obstinate."

The chilling touch of the cold steel caused Rachel to obey, and the masked burglar shook the red blood from his lacerated palm with a low, hard laugh.

"A truly unique way for a tender bride to receive her loving husband, on their bridal night!"

"Begone—leave this room instantly, or I will cry aloud for help and denounce you as the notorious outlaw, Captain Moonshine!" uttered Rachel, with remarkable firmness.

"Do so, and your friends will find you a dead woman. It is my last warning. Remember that a husband has the right to visit his wife's chamber at any and all hours."

If he hoped by such taunts and threats to awe Rachel, the burglar was in error. Instead, he rendered her still more desperate, and her lips parted to utter a loud cry for aid.

Fiercely he sprung upon her, his blood-stained hand grasping her throat and cutting short the scream. Then, with his knife uplifted in readiness to carry out his terrible threat, the burglar turned his face toward the door, listening to learn if the alarm had been given. But no sound came to his ears, and he gradually relaxed his fierce gripe, leaving the maiden gasping for breath and nearly suffocated.

During the brief struggle, his mask became loosened and slipped down over his chin. Rachel saw that she had not been mistaken. Her nocturnal visitor was indeed the notorious road-agent, Captain Moonshine.

"Now listen to me," he said, readjusting his mask and speaking in a guarded but menacing tone. "There has been enough nonsense. I came here for a purpose which I mean to accomplish before I leave. Aid me as far as you can, and I will solemnly swear to leave you unharmed, never again to molest you while we both live."

"The man who stole you away from me, directly after our marriage, at the same time snatched from my hand the certificate signed by us both. This he must have given to you, for he has it not. To decide that fact, cost him his life. Let that fact be a warning to you."

"Tell me where you have hidden the certificate, and I will bid you farewell forever."

"I have not seen it since I was rescued from your power," said Rachel, huskily but with determination, "nor do I know where it is. Even if I did, you should be none the wiser."

There could be no doubting her earnestness, and realizing that further parleying would only consume valuable time vainly, Captain Moonshine quickly saturated the sponge with chloroform and before Rachel realized her peril, she was once again helpless in his strong grasp. For a brief space she struggled against fate, but then the powerful drug prevailed, and she lay unconscious.

Satisfied that she was beyond the power of giving the alarm, Captain Moonshine left the sponge lying upon her bosom, and set to work searching the room closely, not excepting the trunks. But in vain. The important paper upon which at least one life depended, was nowhere to be found.

Daylight was rapidly approaching, and the road-agent only paused to write a few words upon a scrap of paper, which he pinned to the bosom of Rachel's night-dress. Then, opening the window and throwing out both bottle and sponge, he left the room and glided along the darkened corridor.

The new day was dawning when Rachel awoke from her enforced sleep, and nearly the first object her gaze rested upon was the scrap of paper left behind by Captain Moonshine.

Satisfied that she was alone, Rachel secured the note and perused its brief contents:

"The less you say about my visit, the better it will be for your reputation. Keep silent about our wedding; say nothing to outsiders about the certificate, but make every effort to recover it, consistent with prudence. If your enemies find it first, your life will not be worth a day's purchase."

Sick and faint, still feeling the nauseous effects of the drug, Rachel heard the breakfast

bell without the slightest desire to respond, and thus missed a curious sensation.

Ezra Blackwood and son were among the first to reach the eating room, and took their seats with as smooth faces and healthy appetites as though they had passed the whole of the vanished night in the sleep of the just.

They had but little to say to each other, though there was more than one covert and meaning glance interchanged by them as they listened to the eager talk of those around.

As a matter of course the general conversation turned on the exciting events which occurred at the Shades, a nearly complete report of which has already been laid before the reader. The only other items of interest to the two listeners were that the daring assassin had escaped without leaving the faintest clew to his identity, and that the wound received by the young man from Boston was certainly mortal. As far as could be ascertained, the murderer's bullet had either passed through, or still lay imbedded in the heart of the luckless stranger.

"No such good luck," muttered Frank in a guarded tone to his worthy sire. "Ten to one that the scoundrel recovers to make us more trouble. He has the lives of a dozen cats—"

Unnoticed by them, Enoch Dodge had entered the room, and now rapped sharply upon one of the tables as if to command general attention.

His long face seemed longer than ever, and there was a cold, steely look in his eyes that caused the heart of more than one man present, whose record was not exactly white or square, to flutter uneasily.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a forced and unnatural tone, "I s'pose you all hearn of the little muss round to the Shades, last night, an' of the dirty devil's deed that ended it all? A man so white that a chunk o' snow would make a black mark onto him, was shot down by a coward in the dark, jest because he was doin' of his bounden duty by cleanin' out two p'izen critters that ought to 'a' been bounced long ago."

"I see some o' you yer that did your best to find the murderer last night. To you I give my thanks. I won't forget it soon. Nur he won't, nuther, ef so be folks in the happy land kin remember what was done down here on airth—fer my friend died in these here two arms, not two hours ago!"

"Gentlemen, I come to give you all a invite to step in an' view the corpse of the whitest white man that ever trod the footstool. I've knowed him from the time he was knee high to a grasshopper, an' kin sw'ar to that much. I don't reckon thar's many o' you but what has hearn tell of him, an' not one that kin say aught ag'inst him, when I tell you his name: Dan Brown of Denver!"

This announcement created an intense sensation. The fame of the Rocky Mountain Detective had spread all over the West, and though there may have been some among the number who would not have been quite so eager to meet Dan Brown of Denver face to face, while living, the boarders arose as one man and followed the lead of Enoch Dodge.

Frank Blackwood and his father, still suspicious, because they felt that the news was far too good to be true, fell into line, their every sense on the alert to detect the deception which they believed was about to be attempted.

The marshal led the way to his own private office, before the door of which stood two men on guard. He opened the door, and entered, placing himself beside the long table upon which rested a coffin, the lid of which he gently lifted.

"Fall into line, gentlemen, and pass 'round the table, takin' your last look at the corpse of Dan Brown, murdered by a cowardly skunk!" he said, in a husky tone.

In silence he was obeyed. One by one the men paused beside the table and looked upon the white, handsome face of the famous detective, then passed on to make way for others.

The Blackwoods, father and son, paused longer than the rest, and Frank even touched the white, high forehead with the tip of one finger before passing on.

In silence they went to Ezra Blackwood's room, where Frank, in a tone of intense relief, exclaimed:

"He is dead—and lucky for us both, too!"

CHAPTER X.

"PLANTING" THE DETECTIVE.

THE two conspirators looked at each other with ugly smiles. Now that the young man from Boston was proven beyond a doubt to be the celebrated detective, Dan Brown, they were doubly rejoiced at his death.

"I don't believe I am much of a coward, but if I had known that he was to be mixed up in the affair, double the stake wouldn't have tempted me to enter into it," added Frank Blackwood, with a slight shudder.

"He is dead, and killed by some one unknown. Thank heaven his blood does not rest on our hands!" uttered the elder hypocrite in a sanctimonious tone.

"No one will ever know who fired the shot," said Frank, seriously. "The knowledge would be fatal in more senses than one. A dozen aven-

gers of the cursed detective would spring up—worst of all, Enoch Dodge himself."

A deep silence followed, which was first broken by the younger man.

"You had best go and see what is keeping Rachel so long in her room. I'll go and hurry up the team you engaged. We've got good forty miles to drive before we reach old Crabtree's ranch."

They separated, bound upon the errands stated, but Frank Blackwood found that their journey must be delayed, if not postponed, since the team which had been engaged to convey them to Noah Crabtree's, together with every other one in town, was even then being prepared for the funeral of the great detective.

"Better jine in an' see the detective safely planted, boss," said the liveryman, in a low, meaning tone. "Thar's some o' the boys think it's a sort o' double deal, though I can't see how they make it out. I was thar, an' looked at the corpus. Dan Brown or somebody else, what I see in that coffin was a dead man, sure!"

Blackwood made no reply, a look of doubt upon his face. The stableman, misunderstanding the cause, added:

"T'won't keep ye long, fer old Dodge seems in a powerful hurry to git his old pard planted. The day ain't a-goin' to be oupleasant, an' after the funeral I'll hitch ye up a pa'r o' ponies that'll kiver them forty miles in four hours, if needs be."

Recovering himself, Blackwood bade the fellow send the team around to the hotel as soon as possible, then hastened back to meet his father. His face was calm and smiling, but his heart was filled with strong and conflicting emotions, born of the words spoken by the livery-stable keeper.

It seemed impossible that any deception could be practiced in the present case, though at least twice before in his eventful career, Dan Brown had been counted dead and buried by his friends and enemies.

"We must see the play out, and if there is any infernal jugglery going on, surely one of us will detect it," said Frank to his father, after explaining the reason why the team was not in readiness for the trip. "Does Rachel know of this fellow's death?"

"I think not; at any rate, she did not allude to it, nor did I. She seems rather under the weather this morning, which is not to be wondered at, considering all that she has undergone. She is almost painfully eager to leave here and reach her uncle Crabtree's place."

"She must wait an hour or two. We must see this fellow safely planted, or else detect the trick they are trying to play off on us. Keep your tongue still and let your eyes do double duty, now."

Together they descended the stairs, and once more approached the room where the coffin stood with its silent contents, drawn in that direction by the sound of the marshal's voice.

They experienced some little difficulty in effecting an entrance into the crowded room, but finally succeeded in securing a position near the table, where the old lawyer, rising a head above his neighbors, could look down upon the white, still face of the murdered detective.

There had been no change or alteration in the arrangements surrounding, or in the face or position of the body itself, and as he saw this, Ezra Blackwood felt an oppressive band loosen its gripe upon his heart. Despite his strong common sense, he had been unpleasantly impressed by the report which his son made of the stable-keeper's words. But now he knew them to be unfounded, and composed himself to listen to the words uttered by Enoch Dodge.

"He never tuck much stock in the talk o' the gospel sharps, didn't Dan, an' jist afore he died, he told me not to go to any extry trouble over him, but jist to say a few words to all honest men within hearin', an' then to plant him in the bone-yard myself."

"I could talk o' his good p'int's an' vartues from now to next Christmas, or until my tongue was wore down to the roots, an' never mention the same thing twice; but I have sworn to hunt down his murderer an' finish the work that brung him to these parts in disguise, an' I know my old pard would rather I was at work then talkin' away the time."

"Dan Brown come here with the 'fention of huntin' down the p'izen gang o' thieves an' assassins led by the p'izen critter as calls himself Captain Moonshine. An' he'd 'a' done it, too, only thar was a lady got into trouble, an' as a white man, Dan must try to git her out."

"You all know that he got her free, but in the end it cost him his life. I know what I'm sayin'. Some one o' the p'izen gang fired the cowardly shot that killed him, knowin' that while he lived, thar'd be wuss then a bu'sted hornet's nest 'round thar ears. It was the same hand, I reckon, that sot Bruiser Bill an' Brick-top onto him. One was rubbed out an' a blessing fer the town, too, but Bill is in the jug, an' he's got to open his lips an' spit out all he knows. Ef he puts me on the track o' the murderer, then I'll let up on him; ef not—why we'll hav a h'azin' bee anyway."

"Thar may be some one here, within sen' o' my voice, as I'm talkin' to the gang. An' so,

go tell your mates in sin that old Dodge is onto your trail, an' that he never means to leave it while breath lasts, or until he hes run you all down to the death you desurve ten thousand times over!"

"Gentlemen, I don't know as thar is anythin' more that I need say. The record of the corpse kin speak fer itself, and the fame which he won as the true friend o' all that was right an' honest, as the bitter enemy o' all criminals, speak ten thousand times louder an' plainer then I kin, an' forms a better funeral sarmon then a dozen gospel-slingers could preach."

"The gents will please pass around the table an' view the corpse fer the last time, then pass outside whar you'll find kerridges enough to kerry you all to the bone-yard."

In silence he was obeyed, but Frank Blackwood did not leave the room until he saw Enoch Dodge firmly screw down the coffin-lid. And even then he hung around the open door, never once allowing the coffin out of his sight, until six strong men lifted it and bore it down to the waiting hearse.

By this time he was thoroughly convinced that there was no deception being practiced, but as no conveyance could be obtained until the funeral was over, he resolved to make assurance doubly sure, and see his dreaded enemy safely placed beneath the sod.

In an hour's time all was over, and the two conspirators returned to the hotel, outwardly serious enough, but with hearts that laughed exultantly within them.

"Unless his ghost arises to haunt us, I don't think we have anything more to fear from Mr. Daniel Brown of Denver!" laughed Frank, with a sinister cadence.

On inquiry they learned that Rachel was awaiting them in the parlor, and proceeding thither, they found her not a little impatient at the strange delay in setting forth upon their journey.

Ezra Blackwood introduced his son, who immediately claimed the privileges of an old acquaintance.

"I never knew that you were here until this morning, when I met my father at the funeral," he said, in his low, musical voice that expressed so much more than the mere words conveyed. "It was a joyous surprise to me, but had I met you on the street, I should never have recognized you. As I well remember, my little playmate was very pretty then, but now—"

"You find her sadly altered, I doubt not," interposed Rachel, with a faint smile, not altogether of displeasure. "But you said a funeral? I thought we were to start very early for uncle Crabtree's?"

"So man proposed, but fate disposed otherwise," said Frank lightly, before his father could answer. "A certain celebrity was killed in a gambling hell last night, and all the conveyances in town were pressed in to do him a last honor. Out here, the more men a person has killed the greater the fame, and weighed in that balance, the self-styled detective, Dan Brown of Denver—"

Rachel uttered a sharp cry as if in acute pain, and her large eyes were fixed upon the face of the speaker with a look of terror. Her lips parted, and she said, slowly:

"Dead? He was the one who rescued me last night?"

As though greatly alarmed, Frank hastened after a glass of water, but when he returned, Rachel had gone to her room to prepare for the journey.

"Why did you break the news so bluntly?" demanded Ezra Blackwood, in an irritable tone.

"To satisfy myself," was the cool response. "It is doubly fortunate for our plans that the detective is dead and buried. The girl has fallen over head and ears in love with him already! One more meeting between them—"

The sentence was left incomplete as Rachel entered the room in hat and ulster. The light wagon in which the journey was to be performed, was at the door, and Rachel seemed feverishly anxious to leave the Golden Eagle.

Now that his enemy was fairly disposed of, Frank Blackwood yielded to a sudden temptation to see more of his beautiful playmate of the long ago, and left hastily for his horse, overtaking the wagon soon after it left the town and entered upon the flat, level plain.

During the long and rapid ride, he was unusually brilliant and entertaining, laying himself out to make a favorable impression upon Rachel, but there was too great a burden upon both her mind and heart for his success to be very flattering.

There was nothing in the journey deserving particular mention until the road wound through the little timber grove beside the river, where the early hours of the past night had witnessed such a direful tragedy.

The dangling body had disappeared, but the severed rope was still hanging over the water, and Frank Blackwood made a careless remark about that significant evidence of lawless violence. But as he noticed the paper fastened to the tree, and read the bold announcement written thereon, his brow clouded and a hard light flared in his eyes.

Fortunately, in view of what afterward oc-

curred, Rachel did not understand his flippant observation, but remained buried in her own gloomy reflection until the home of her relatives was reached.

Her appearance was a complete surprise, for, as she soon learned, the letter announcing her coming had failed to reach its destination, and though she was cordially welcomed, she felt depressed by the air of uneasy constraint which seemed to rest upon the entire household, save and except Noah Crabtree.

It was not long before Rachel understood the cause of this, at least as far as poor Ruth could enlighten her. Glad to find some one whom she could make her confidante, the pale, wan girl told all that had transpired, so far as she knew it. The tragedy in the grove had been carefully kept from her knowledge, and she was given to understand that Will Wilder had resigned all claims to her hand, and would never molest her again.

The terrible truth must have come out, had Rachel understood the words of Frank Blackwood, and almost certainly there would have been another death to record as the sequel of that black tragedy.

The afternoon wore away slowly enough to all more immediately concerned in this chronicle. The two girls remained up-stairs, and Frank Blackwood caught himself more than once wishing himself back in town, as he and his father were shown over the place by the stern old man, whose greatest display of hospitality and friendliness could not prevent his manner from disagreeably impressing nearly every one with whom he came in contact.

For domestic reasons, supper was later than usual that night, and it was quite dark before all were gathered around the well-laden board.

The meal was not yet finished, when one of the herders, who ate by themselves in their rude quarters, gave the alarm of fire!

Instantly every person rushed out of doors. Three huge stacks of hay in an inclosure were all ablaze, threatening to spread from thence to the fences and outbuildings, when no mortal means could preserve the house itself from destruction.

All—men, women and children—rushed to the rescue, but nothing could be done save to tear down the connecting fences, and even this was attended with great risk.

When all were busied thus, the sharp report of a rifle rung out, and one of the men fell dead, shot through the brain!

"I come back from the lowest depths of hell to haunt you!"

It was the voice and the words of Will Wilder!

CHAPTER XI.

A BUSINESS TRANSACTION.

MORE than one remark was made concerning the haste which Enoch Dodge displayed in completing the burial of his murdered friend, but all this was clearly explained within a few minutes after the funeral procession returned to town. And then every one saw that the marshal was resolved to lose no time in paying off the legacy of vengeance left him by Dan Brown of Denver.

Fully two-score men, armed to the teeth and mounted upon the best horses possible to be procured in town, each one carrying rations for three days in case of necessity, collected before the Golden Eagle, where they were speedily joined by Enoch Dodge. Leading them at a rapid trot clear of the town over the regular stage road, he halted them long enough to make known his plans.

"Gentlemen, you all know that this county has bin double-cursed by the dirty doin's of that critter, Cap'n Moonshine an' his p'izen outfit. You know, too, that my murdered pard came here to ferret 'em out; an' he'd 'a' done it, too, ef they hadn't shot him down from kiver. But he lived long enough to tell me all he discovered while rescuin' the young lady, last night."

"We're bound now fer that same hole in the ground an' I only hope we may find the road-agents to home. Ef we do—waal, wolf-skulps 'll be a drug in the market—you hear me?"

A united cheer greeted this significant conclusion. The posse had been well chosen, and there was not one present who would flinch before the burning of powder or the flashing of steel. Particularly did they desire to meet Captain Moonshine and his outlaws, face to face, with a clear field and no favor.

Satisfied with the reception of his brief speech, the marshal led the way to the spot where the incoming stage was halted on the evening before, then took the winding trail followed by the road-agent and his prisoners, real and pretended.

Dan Brown must have given his friend very minute directions how to find the outlaws' retreat, for Enoch Dodge was never at a loss, following the correct course as truly as though he was gifted with the keen nose of a bloodhound.

Greater caution was displayed as they neared the cavern, but as after events proved, this was time needlessly lost.

The mackin' bushes and vines that had served

to conceal the entrance from casual observation were torn and trampled to the ground; and this little fact told the keen-witted man-hunters what they might expect inside.

Enoch Dodge and several selected men dismounted and cautiously entered the cavern, creeping along in the darkness until fully assured that the great chamber, at least, was unoccupied save by themselves. But to make all things sure, Enoch Dodge uttered an agreed upon signal that put his immediate companions upon the alert, then struck a match and touched it to a spirit-saturated sponge which he took from a tin-case. As this flashed up with dazzling brilliancy he hurled it into the center of the room.

Each man saw only his own friends, and revolvers were uncocked with murmurs of grim disappointment.

There could no longer be any doubt about the matter. The road-agents, warned by the escape of Dan Brown, had hurriedly dismantled the retreat and fled in search of a more secure refuge.

Enoch Dodge called in all of his men save a horse-guard, and with hastily prepared torches, the underground retreat was thoroughly explored.

This was found to consist of half a dozen chambers, the majority of them small but tolerably comfortable.

A second means of exit was found, large enough to admit the passage of a horse, and the last chamber, from the abundant sign scattered around, had clearly been used as a stable.

"That settles it for the present, at any rate," said Enoch Dodge, intense chagrin written upon every feature. "The pizen critters is skunk out, an' it'd call for a bloodhound nose to trail 'em through these rocks. Anyhow, no more o' that kind scall ever find kiver in these holes."

The worthy marshal had come prepared for every emergency that could arise, and returning to the horses, he unpacked several canisters of giant powder from the saddlebags with which his saddle was furnished.

Briefly explaining his plan, he called for several volunteers to pass through the hill and complete the work of destruction from the other side. Giving them their instructions, he waited until the echoes of a pistol-shot reverberated through the hollow hill, then placed his destructive agent in the most favorable position, and assuring himself that his men were out of danger, he touched off the fuse and beat a rapid retreat down the narrow defile.

Five minutes later came a tremendous crash, and the very hill seemed annihilated. Great rocks rose high into the air. The roof of the hill fell in with a tremendous crash as the rock walls cracked and separated.

And in a few minutes more there came a second explosion, scarcely less destructive. Where the hollow hill had reared its crest proudly, now lay a mass of broken rocks and smoke-blackened debris. The outlaw retreat was no more.

Still, this was but poor consolation to those who had set out in strong hope of forever ridding the country of a merciless scourge, and it was a silent, sullen crowd that rode back to the town.

Enoch Dodge entertained strong hopes of learning something important through his prisoner, Bruiser Bill, and after dinner he left his hotel and visited the stout stone building which served the purpose of calaboose.

Here again he was doomed to disappointment, for he found the battered pugilist in a raging fever, delirious and unable to understand a word that was spoken to him.

He had received frightful punishment at the hands of the detective before he yielded, and Dodge began to fear that Dan Brown had done his work only too well.

Giving the jailer instructions to have in a nurse and to afford the prisoner every thing necessary, the expense to be charged to him, Dodge left the building.

"Reckon Bruiser is in a powerful bad way, judgin' from his yelpin' an' howlin'," uttered a voice at his elbow.

Even before he turned sharply upon the speaker, the marshal recognized the voice as that of a dirty, greasy, disreputable bumner, whom the eye of justice had long regarded with suspicion. As a general thing, Billy Cooper carefully kept out of range of the marshal, but now there was a change in his manner that at once attracted the attention of Enoch Dodge.

His little, bloodshot eyes twinkled avariciously, and there was a cunning expression, not unmingled with apprehension, playing around his labby mouth.

"What is it you're up to, Billy?" demanded Dodge, sharply. "Spit it out, unless you want me to lay you by the heels in the cooler, yonder."

"Ef I happened to know anybody as could tell you all you wanted to larn of Bruiser, in thar, mebber you'd be willin' to make a trade—money for information?" hesitated the bumner, evidently ready to take to his heels at the first aggressive movement on the part of the marshal.

"Ef a man was tryin' to come any gum game

over me, I'd give him a long rope an' a tough limb," retorted the marshal, significantly.

"Nd serve the dirty cuss right, too," was the prompt response. "But it ain't overly safe to be see'd talkin' 'bout sech matters in the open street. Critters like Cap. Moonshine an' his boys have got prodigious memories, an' ef a barg'in was struck, an' any o' them was to git away, I don't reckon salt'd keep me from sp'il'in' very long."

"What do you know? Spit it out, an' ef it comes to any thin', I'll pay you whatever it's wuth."

"Tain't me that's got the goods to sell—wuss luck! But ef you will deal on the squar', I'll take you to the man that kin liver the articles you most want just now."

A keen judge of human nature, Enoch Dodge believed the bumner was speaking the truth for once in his life, and bade him lead the way. Even if evil was contemplated, he was armed, and felt fully able to guard his own life.

"Mebbe you'd better keep a little ways behind," said Cooper, with a leer. "Ef folks thought you was follerin' me, it might ruin my reputation as a gentleman—"

He ceased and shambled ahead at a half run as Dodge made a quick step forward. Clearly the marshal was in no humor for appreciating a joke.

A few minutes carried them to the same saloon and restaurant where Frank Blackwood found his tools on the night before, and with a covert sign to the bartender, Cooper led the way to a small room at the rear end of the building, where a heavily built man was seated at a small table, facing the door.

"This is the gentleman I spoke of, marshal," said Cooper, with a wave of his hand. "Hope you kin make the deal."

Leaving the room, he closed the door behind him.

"Help yourself to a chair, Mr. Dodge," said the stranger, in an affable tone. "Draw up and a have nip and a smoke."

Upon the table were glasses, liquor and cigars. Not to be outdone in coolness, Dodge drew a chair close to the table opposite the man, selected and lit a cigar.

While thus occupied, his eyes were busy. Gifted with a rare memory for faces, he knew that he had never met this person before. At the same time he mentally set him down as a thoroughbred rascal.

"No doubt you are wondering why I hired that drunken hog to guide you here," abruptly began the stranger. "One reason was because I knew we could have a quiet talk, without danger of havin' our words eavesdropped. Another was that I didn't care to approach you openly, not knowing what eyes might be turned upon us."

"You have some information to sell: what is it?" bluntly.

"What amount would you be willing to pay for reliable information concerning the gang of Captain Moonshine? Of his present hiding-place, full direction show to find it, with the signs, signals and passwords used by the gang?"

"Do you know all this?" demanded the marshal, his eyes glowing, his cheeks flushing deeply.

"No, but then I think I am sharp enough to learn if it is made worth my while. You see, since Dan Brown of Denver is off the trail, I've thought some of turnin' detective myself, and this would be a good opening stroke."

There was a mocking cadence in the fellow's answer that annoyed the marshal, while it told him that he was not to be entrapped into any premature admission. But smothering his ire as best he could, Dodge said:

"Thar's fifteen hundred dollars on the head o' Cap'n Moonshine, in three different rewards. But to the man that brings him to justice, or gives information that leads to my ketchin' him, alive or dead, I'll agree to raise five thousand dollars by subscription. Don't you think that'll pay you?"

"Write me out that pledge, and then we will talk business," was the prompt response, as the fellow produced pen and ink from his pocket, then tore a blank leaf from a memorandum-book.

The marshal did not hesitate a moment, but wrote out the pledge and signed it in firm, bold characters.

"Thar you hev it, an' no man livin' kin say that Enoch Dodge ever went back onto his bare word, let alone his written bond. Now tell me when an' whar I kin find the thiev'in' dog that murdered my pard, Dan Brown."

"Good! now I see you are in earnest, and don't mind admitting that I am one of Captain Moonshine's men. Just why I am ready and anxious to betray him to justice, don't matter now. Enough that he lied to me and injured me deeply on a very sensitive point. But, one thing must be settled. I will give you all the necessary information, but I'll not act as guide, nor must we be seen together even for a moment. This town is full of spies, and if my treachery was even suspected, my life wouldn't be worth an hour's purchase."

"You shall be put in a safe place—an' whar I know whar to put my hand onto ye ef so be it

turns out you hev bin playin' any gum game. I don't run no risks—"

The sentence was never ended, for at that instant the traitor sitting opposite to the marshal quickly shifted his foot, and like magic the floor gave way, precipitating Enoch Dodge into unknown regions below!

CHAPTER XII.

MARSHAL DODGE IN DIFFICULTIES.

WITH one mechanical, intellectual grasp at the table as he felt the floor sinking beneath him, Enoch Dodge shot swiftly down through what seemed an immense distance, then struck an earthen floor with a force that shattered his chair to atoms and nearly disjoined his own bones—a force so great that he was stunned and rendered senseless for the time being.

Yet through it all he seemed awake to the fact that no sooner had he touched bottom than he was pounced upon by enemies lying in wait, and hastily but thoroughly bound hand and foot.

Nor was this all a fancy. There had been a cunning plan laid to entrap the city marshal. The bumner had cunningly baited the trap, and the pretended traitor to Captain Moonshine had sprung it, knowing that four stout men were hidden in the pit, ready to secure the game.

It was well that they were so prompt, for Enoch Dodge quickly recovered from the shock of his fall, and with every nerve tensely strung he sought to make a tough fight for his life and liberty. But the four ruffians had done their work well by the light of a bull's eye lantern, and Marshal Dodge felt himself bound hand and foot with cords that would not yield even to his great strength.

"Raise the ladder and let me come down," cried the man who had sprung the trap, and who appeared to be one in authority, judging from the prompt manner in which he was obeyed by the others. In fact, he was the same ruffian whom, on the night before, Captain Moonshine had addressed as Wolf, and was the second in command of the road-agents.

A light ladder was raised and held firm while the lieutenant descended. Taking up the bull's-eye and assuring himself that the bands of the marshal were thoroughly applied, he bade the four men ascend the ladder to the room above, there to replace the trap-door and await his call.

As promptly as before he was obeyed, the four men being glad to leave the damp, cold and generally uncomfortable quarter where they had spent several hours in waiting.

"Well, marshal, old fellow, this doesn't look much like capturing Captain Moonshine and his merry men, does it?" uttered Wolf, with a mocking laugh, as he squatted down beside the prisoner, turning the full glow of the lantern upon his hard features.

There came no answer in words, but from those steely gray eyes came a look of such deadly hatred and menace that the outlaw, iron-nerved though he prided himself on being, felt a cold thrill playing up and down his spinal column.

"Turnin' sulky will do you no good, old man," added the road-agent, crushing down his sensation of uneasiness. "You have played trapper so long that it is no more than justice you should be trapped for once. Be wise, and no harm shall come to you. Be obstinate—well, I reckon Grenada will have to look up another marshal, that's all."

"Talk to the point," growled Enoch Dodge, sharply.

"Good! I began to fear that you had bitten your tongue off when you took that little tumble," laughed Wolf, sneeringly. "In one word, then, where is the certificate of marriage?"

The marshal stared at him as though unable to comprehend the meaning of this question.

Assuming a patience he was far from feeling, Wolf said:

"You must know that Captain Moonshine was lawfully wedded last night to Miss Rachel Trowbridge. Your friend, Dan Brown, the self-styled detective, interfered and ran off with both the bride and the marriage-certificate. For some reason of his own he kept the document, since Madame Moonshine declares that he did not deliver it to her. Last night Dan Brown was rubbed out, and this morning buried. You alone were with him when he died, and naturally fell heir or custodian of his secrets and effects. Among them must have been that paper. It is of no value save to Captain Moonshine and his wife, and to recover that certificate is the only reason why I have opened these negotiations with you."

"I don't know nothin' about any sech paper, an' if I did, I'd see you all in the hottest fires o'— afore I'd tell you whar to find it," bluntly growled Dodge.

"Don't be too positive, friend Enoch. I've dealt with just as obstinate men in my time, and convinced them against their will, too. When it becomes a question of life or death, the best of us will weaken. You are sure you haven't got the certificate with you?"

The marshal deigned to make no reply, and

Wolf, by aid of the lantern, carefully searched his papers from head to foot, but without finding the document to gain possession of which so much plotting was being done.

Annoyed by his failure, and still further nettled by the obstinacy of the prisoner, Wolf delivered his ultimatum in a hard, vengeful tone:

"It's either the certificate or your life. You know where it is, and unless you yield it to us, you shall die the death of a sheep-killing cur. I give you two hours to weigh the matter, and make your decision. At the end of that time, I'll come here for your answer, to deal out death or liberty as the case may be."

Pausing a moment for the answer that did not come, Wolf gave the signal for the trap-door to be lowered, and placing the ladder in position, he ascended bearing with him the bull's-eye lantern. A moment later the trap-door was raised and the darkness of death fell over the helpless prisoner in the damp pit.

Bold, fearless man though he undeniably was, those two hours seemed a lifetime to Enoch Dodge as he lay there in the darkness, bound hand and foot.

He knew where the certificate of marriage was hidden, but not for an instant did he think of yielding it up.

Despite the great peril of his own situation, he could not help wondering why Captain Moonshine was so anxious to gain possession of the document. Could it be possible that it was more than a mere certificate of marriage? that there was some important secret contained within it?

"Ef over I git out o' this hobble right eend up'ards, I'm goin' to find out all about it, sure!" he muttered.

There was little prospect of his escape. Only his tongue was at liberty, and he knew that any exercise of that organ would only result in bringing his enemies down upon him. He did not believe that any friend had noticed him enter the saloon, or even if they had, nothing would be thought of it. He knew, too, that he might be absent from the hotel for several days at a stretch, without any suspicion of foul play being aroused in his friends' minds.

"They've got me foul, dead sure!" he muttered, sullenly. "But they can't do no more than kill me anyhow!"

Meanwhile Wolf and his fellow-plotters were but little more easy in their minds. They were now convinced that the marshal could not be terrified into yielding to their will, and though, as a matter of self-preservation they had determined beforehand upon the death of the officer, the owner of the building now flatly refused to have blood shed on the premises.

"My oath of fealty to the 'family' don't run that far. The police have an eye upon my place already. Suspicion will be aroused, and some one will remember seeing him come in here. Search will be made, and the trap-door found. After that—if body or bones are found—good-by!"

The rendezvous was too valuable to risk its being destroyed, and as the shades of night began to settle over the town, Wolf dispatched his allies on important business, while he returned to receive the answer of Enoch Dodge.

This was given promptly enough, and consisted of a flat refusal to betray the trust reposed in him by his murdered friend.

Scarcely had the words left his lips before Wolf struck him a swift, sure blow on the temple with a pistol butt, instantly depriving him of his senses. Then producing a stout gag from an inner pocket, the outlaw pressed open the marshal's jaws with the blade of his knife, inserting the gag and tying it firmly in place.

A few minutes later he heard footsteps in the room above, and at his whistle, his allies lowered a stout rope.

Securing one end of this around the senseless man's waist, he gave the word to haul away, and Enoch Dodge was drawn up into the room, after which the trap door was closed.

The marshal was carried through a back door into a small yard with a high and tight board fence around it.

In this inclosure now stood six horses, saddled and bridled ready for the road. Upon one of these, the limp form of Enoch Dodge was lifted, and then bound securely in the saddle in such a manner that had he been dead instead of merely unconscious, he would not have fallen off.

When all was arranged to his satisfaction, Wolf gave the order to mount, adding in a guarded tone:

"Until we get clear of the town, act like you all had a pretty good load of bad whisky aboard. Then, if we are noticed, it will be believed that the old man is too drunk to sit up straight in the saddle."

The idea was a cunning one, and as a large overcoat was hung around the form of the prisoner, his hat being pulled over his eyes, his drooping head and swaying body did present the picture of a thoroughly drunken man. And so, talking loudly, with an occasional whoop and yell, the outlaws rode out of the town, leaving the natural impression behind that they were all "half-sens-over."

Soon after the town was cleared, Enoch Dodge, lying in the saddle, began to realize his situation, but cunningly counterfeited unconscious-

ness while striving to free his hands and feet, resolved to make a desperate fight for life and liberty should he succeed. All was in vain, however, and as a low, mocking laugh came from the lips of Wolf, feeling that his efforts were noticed and understood, he sullenly yielded to the inevitable.

For full two hours the outlaws rode through the rocky passes and defiles, pressing on into the heart of the sterile, forbidding region, lighted on their intricate way by the mellow beams of the moon.

At length Wolf reined in his horse and the outlaws dismounted. Enoch Dodge was lifted from his animal and bound to an upright pillar of rock, facing a deep chasm that lay only a few yards before him.

"Now, friend Dodge," said Wolf, at the same time donning a crape mask, an example followed by his comrades, "I am going to give you a last chance for your life—"

"I will now take charge of the affair," suddenly interposed one of the four men, stepping forward. "Perhaps Mr. Dodge would prefer dealing with the principal to the agent."

A peculiar thrill crept over the prisoner as he looked keenly at the speaker, for there flashed across his mind the description which Dan Brown had given him of Captain Moonshine, and he felt that that person stood before him.

A low laugh came from the lips of the black-bearded man.

"I see you know me," he said, tersely. "You are right. I am Captain Moonshine, whom you have longed so fervently to meet; but hardly under these conditions, I imagine."

"Ef my hands was only free!" grated Dodge, his eyes glowing.

"But they are not, nor will they ever be free, save in death, unless you come to terms right speedily. You have possession of, or know where to lay hands upon a document that belongs to me. Deliver that into my hands—give me an order for its delivery, or else tell me how I can gain possession of it—and you may go free, your life safe until we meet again. Refuse, and—"

"Spit it out! You air talkin' to a man with a backbone an' not a coward like you air used to consort with. Ef I refuse, what then?" boldly demanded Dodge.

"I hate to say it, for you are a brave man if an enemy, but by the moon and stars above us! if you refuse this offer, you die!" sternly cried Captain Moonshine. "Not all at once. You shall be tortured to the utmost extent of human endurance, and then, when death does come to your rescue, your mangled carcass shall be cast over the edge, yonder, to be picked to pieces by the wolves and vultures!"

"Ef the hope o' my playin' the traitor to my murdered pard is all that holds back your hands, why you kin go on with your rat-killin' at once," boldly replied the prisoner. "I'll never squeal—you git no paper from me!"

At that moment, when Captain Moonshine, with a low, fierce curse of rage, drew a long knife, a clear voice rung out sharply upon the still night air:

"Go slow, pilgrims! I reckon I'll take a hand in this game!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE AVENGER AT WORK.

SLAIN so suddenly that not a sound escaped his lips, the unfortunate herdsman fell dead almost at the feet of his young wife, who was, in common with the rest, nobly battling to save her master's property from destruction.

Sharp and menacing rung out the strange words which followed the death-shot and the eyes of all save those of the newly-made widow, turned in that direction.

Just within the rapidly widening circle of light cast around by the blazing stacks, a single horseman was visible, tall, dark and forbidding as he shook one clenched fist in the air as though hurling bitter curses at his enemies.

One instant thus, then his horse wheeled as if upon a pivot and the assassin sped away into the shades of night with a shrill, mocking laugh floating back behind him.

Brief as that interval was, at least three among the men present believed that they recognized the dread rider—the three who, in company with him whose bullet-pierced head was now resting against the bosom of his wailing wife, had intercepted Will Wilder while bearing away the bride of his heart. And there was one other—for with a wailing cry of terror and despair, Ruth Crabtree dropped like a felled tree and would have fallen to the ground only for the supporting arms of Rachel Trowbridge.

Brave, icy-nerved, Noah Crabtree was the first to recover from that terrible surprise, and drawing a revolver, he leaped forward on foot, sending bullet after bullet in the direction taken by the avenger. As in duty bound the herdsman followed his example, but only that mocking, devilish laugh came back to their ears, then the rapid trampling of hoofs died away in the distance.

"Back!" cried Noah Crabtree, realizing the folly of further pursuit on foot. "Back! for horses and brands!"

Here too he was promptly obeyed, but the moment they turned from the trail, each of the men saw that the fire must be stubbornly fought, if they hoped to save the dwelling-house and other buildings from destruction.

There was a fresh breeze blowing over the prairie, lifting flakes of the blazing hay and floating them directly toward the buildings. These, nearly all composed of wood and dry as tinder from the long and severe drouth, were already smoking and bursting into flames at several distinct points.

"Scatter and fight the fire as best you can!" shouted Noah Crabtree, setting a manful example himself. "Vengeance shall be none the less sure if postponed a few minutes. Old Music can follow wherever that assassin may lead."

The emergency was really critical, and all, men, women and the children of the herdsman worked faithfully, desperately. There was an abundance of water on the place, but only such as a dozen deep wells afforded, and drawing this by windlass and bucket was tedious work, so most of the fire-fighting was done with wet blankets and hides.

A hot and suffocating ten minutes, then the glowing flames were checked and the fire confined to the haystacks. Now all that was needed was to keep a close and active look-out to prevent the fire from spreading.

Improving the first moment possible to spare from the desperate struggle for his property, Noah Crabtree opened the small store-house previously alluded to. Bringing forth three goodly-sized rockets, he touched them off at regular intervals, sending a shower of brilliantly colored stars high up in the heavens.

"That is the signal for the Vigilantes to collect here," muttered David Crabtree to Frank Blackwood. "There'll be music in the air before the day dawns, but I doubt greatly if the hounds can be induced to follow that trail!"

"Then you recognized him—you know who it was that fired the fatal shot?" demanded the lawyer, with strong curiosity or some kindred emotion written upon his face.

"I know what it was, two hours later than this last night—a dead man, hanging over the water at the end of a rope noosed by the Vigilantes," and as he spoke, the youth glanced around him with a nervous air.

Just then the aid of all hands was needed as a sharp gust of wind lifted large flakes of burning hay and sent them whirling over and around the heated buildings. But when this danger was fought down, Frank Blackwood and David Crabtree once more came together.

The former knew more than he cared to acknowledge, and by adroit questioning soon led the lad into telling the story of the frustrated elopement and the dark tragedy which followed so close upon its heels.

Carefully as he schooled his features, there was something in his face that betrayed him to his father, who, when young Crabtree turned away, advanced and muttered:

"What now? anything turned up to threaten our plans?"

"No: only one of my best and most trusty men was hung last night by that sanctimonious hypocrite whose guests we have the honor of being—may the devil roast him!"

By this time the haystacks were nearly consumed, and the danger of further loss greatly lessened. Leaving the women and his son on guard, Noah Crabtree set about preparing horses and hounds for taking the trail.

By the stern Vigilantes were beginning to come in, promptly answering the gathering signal, and ere long a dozen men were in readiness to take the trail of the bold assassin.

In a few words Noah Crabtree acquainted them with what had occurred, adding:

"Early this morning when we went to bury the body, we found it missing, the rope severed close to the noose. We must have made a fatal mistake last night. Some one of his comrades in evil must have been concealed in the timber, and as soon as we left, came forth and cut down his fellow criminal. We believed him dead, but in that we were mistaken: for the man who murdered poor Simpson yonder, was none other than Will Wilder!"

The two herdsman, fellows of the assassinated man, were not so certain of this. They recalled the terrible earnestness with which their victim vowed to return from heaven or its antipodes to avenge his disgrace and death upon them, and all. And they could not believe that the man whom they had watched die a horrible death by strangulation had come back to life again.

In secret they congratulated themselves when Noah Crabtree bade them remain on guard to see that the fire did not spread or spring up anew.

Both Frank Blackwood and his father volunteered to bear the Vigilantes company, but Crabtree begged them to remain in charge of the house and women.

"There is no telling what may be the upshot," he added, seriously. "That murderer was proven one of the chief members of the gang led by the notorious Captain Moonshine. This fire and murder may be but a ruse to draw us all away in pursuit, leaving the road clear for them to

swoop down and empty our corrals. As a favor to me, remain here. Keep all well secured in the house, and if an attack is made, send up three more rockets, and we will answer the call."

Four hounds, with old Music as leader, were placed upon the trail, and close at their heels rode the Vigilantes, sternly resolved to make sure work of their bold enemy this time in case they should overtake him.

The dead herdsman was carried to his own cabin, where his heart-broken wife and terrified child mourned bitterly over his corpse.

The two Blackwoods retired to the dwelling-house, and as Rachel and her aunt were with Ruth, they drew close together and conversed in low, guarded tones.

The herdsmen left on guard over the fire, James Kintner and Robert Harvey, though feeling tolerably safe now that the Vigilantes were afoot, took warning by the fate of their comrade and kept closely under cover, talking in low tones that were far from steady. Ignorant and unlearned men, like the majority of such, there was a vein of strong superstition running through their compositions. Both believed that the man whom they had helped to hang was dead ere they left the grove; and yet they each would have solemnly sworn that they recognized Will Wilder in the horseman who fled that death-shot.

"He swore he'd come back to ha'nt us," muttered Kintner, with a nervous glance around him as though frightened by the sound of his own voice. "I've bin sorry ever sence. It was rough on the poor feller. Jest 'cause he was in love with the gal. The old man is too durned hard. Poor ez I be, ef I was once a good hundred miles from here, I wouldn't change places with him, fer all his cattle and horses!"

"They'll more come of it, be sure," uttered Robert Harvey, the second stockman. "Ef I live through ontel mornin', I'm goin' to pull out of this fer a healthier kentry, whar ghosts don't ride hossback an' shoot down honest critters!"

Thus they conversed, adding to their own fears by the wild fancies to which they gave utterance. More than once before they had helped to take human life, but then there had been no after-clap. The dead rested quietly in their unhallowed graves. But now—they felt that they were haunted men, and had the surrounding darkness not added to their fears, they would have mounted their horses and fled far away.

Nearly an hour passed thus, when the freshening breeze fanned a portion of the fence into a blaze, and for the moment forgetting their fears in a sense of the duty they owed to their employer, both men ran out from their cover with clipping blankets to extinguish the flames.

They succeeded in doing this, but then a cry of superstitious horror broke simultaneously from their lips.

Out from behind the nearest corral rode a dark horseman, and recognizing what they believed to be the restless spirit of Will Wilder, they turned to flee in mad affright, making no effort to use the weapons they bore in their belts.

Swift as an arrow the horseman overtook and passed them by, and as he did so, those fear-inspiring words once more fell from his lips, sounding to them like the awful tramp of doom!

There was a swift circle made by the rider's hand, and then a horrible gurgling shriek burst from the lips of James Kintner, cut short in his throat as the cold noose of a lasso tightened around it and hurled him headlong to the ground.

A wild, fierce laugh came back as the terrible avenger sped away over the plain, the body of the doomed herdsman at the end of the lasso, bounding and dragging after him!

Half-insane with horror, Harvey ran to the house and burst open the door before the alarmed inmates could admit him.

The Blackwoods, father and son, either were, or seemed to be, too greatly confused to do aught, but Mrs. Crabtree glided out to the storehouse and quickly discharged the rockets that were to hasten her husband's return.

The Vigilantes made their appearance before they were expected, the trail they were following having made a wide circuit and then approached the ranch from a direction opposite to that in which it had departed.

Some little time was lost before the horrible facts of the case could be learned from Harvey, who, for the time being, was wholly unmanned and almost senseless with fear. But then a brief search resulted in finding the hat which had fallen from the doomed stockman's head as the fatal noose encircled his throat, and by means of this the bloodhounds were quickly placed upon the right scent.

Swiftly they ran, and close upon their heels rode the Vigilantes, their faces pale and stern-set, for they knew that they were one and all marked men—that their lives were not their own while this terrible avenger ranged the plains.

Straight for the little grove where Will Wilder had been hung four-and-twenty hours before, the hounds led the way, and as the horse-

men reached the edge of the timber, the low but gradually rising wail from the mouth of old Music told them what to expect. Each man knew that they were too late, and it was with strong feelings of awe that they rode into the morse, pausing before the death-tree.

There, hanging over the swift-running water, pendent from the same limb to which Will Wilder had been hung, dangled a dark and shapeless mass that all knew could only be the remains of unfortunate James Kintner.

Such proved to be the case. Horribly mangled, scarce retaining the semblance of humanity, the dead herdsman was cut down.

Upon his breast was pinned a scrap of paper, briefly stating that he was slain for helping to murder an innocent man. It was *number two*, and appended was the name of *Will Wilder*!

CHAPTER XIV.

"IDAHO IRA ON DECK."

As that clear, incisive voice burst so unexpectedly upon their hearing, Captain Moonshine and his men instinctively threw themselves on the defensive, but it was only a single man that confronted them, instead of the marshal's entire posse, as their fears had at once suggested.

Active as a panther, the bold speaker arose from the deep shadow lying at the base of a rock hard by, and with one swift leap stood between the prisoner and his five captors. Two silver-mounted revolvers gleamed coldly in the rays of the moon, and the polished tubes rose to a level as the outlaws touched their weapons.

"Slow and easy, gentlemen!" the bold intruder cried, in a clear, resonant tone. "If an enemy to you, I could have shot you down from yonder cover and sent your spirits wailing along the death-trail before you could have realized what was up. But I didn't. Dog don't eat dog as long as more palatable food offers itself."

"What in blazes do you mean, then, by this interference in a matter that does not concern you?" demanded Captain Moonshine, angrily, yet flinching before the leveled pistols.

"Simply that I have a prior claim on the life of Marshal Enoch Dodge—a claim so serious that, five to one as you are, I mean to fight for it to the very death!"

"There's room for both him and you down in the gulch," uttered the road-agent, menacingly. "He knows too much to let slip through our fingers now!"

A short, reckless laugh parted the lips of the stranger.

"I could kill two of you before you could draw a weapon—another brace before you could fire a shot; and Idaho Ira has yet to find the single man that can handle him—"

"Are you Idaho Ira?" interposed Captain Moonshine, eagerly.

"I am—now what are you going to do about it?"

"It was your brother that he hung, six months ago!"

"Exactly—and that constitutes my claim upon him. There was no great amount of love lost between brother Ben and I, but blood is thicker than water, and I swore that I would avenge his death upon this hound. Whatever else I may be, I am no liar. Kill him I will—and if you interfere, he will have company across the dark river."

Captain Moonshine and his four companions each drew a long breath of relief as the bold intruder uttered these words. They well knew the reputation of Idaho Ira as a "bad man," and heavy as the odds were in their favor, little relished the idea of meeting the desperado in a life or death grapple. Before the announcement of his name, they believed his purpose was to rescue Enoch Dodge from their grasp, but that fear no longer troubled them.

The brothers, Ben and Ira Hardin, had won a bloody and most unenviable reputation as fire-eaters and desperadoes of the most dangerous class. Time and again those two alone had "captured" towns containing as many thousand inhabitants, holding the streets for hour after hour, running matters as their own wild will suggested, and then riding away in mocking triumph, leaving dead and dying men behind them as mementoes of their raid.

Then came a quarrel between the brothers, and they separated. Ben Hardin wandered to Grenada, and while half drunk attempted to "run the town," single-handed. Enoch Dodge had just been elected marshal, and promptly "went for" the wild "vaugh-hoss," taking him into camp after a free burning of powder and a tough personal encounter. In that affray two outsiders were killed, and the result was the speedy trial, condemnation and hanging of the desperado.

Idaho Ira had always been counted the "best man" of the fighting brothers, and as his range had been principally in the sister State to Colorado, he and the road-agents had never until now encountered each other. Feeling him a kindred spirit, Captain Moonshine and his comrades now gazed curiously upon the notorious desperado.

But little if any above the medium height, Idaho Ira was a perfect model of muscular grace and physical perfection. Broad shouldered,

full, round chest, small waist, hips almost as swelling as those of a woman, muscular thighs and lower limbs, well displayed by his buckskin suit. A face that was not uncomely, though dark as that of an Indian; a face that would have been handsome, only for the bulbous appearance of the nose which, in company with his cheeks, seemed bloated with bad whisky. His hair was long and curling, of a jetty blackness, and the well oiled locks seemed the special pride of their wearer.

"Spit it out, and lively, too!" he cried, impatiently. "Are we to fight for the honor of wiping this fellow out, or do you acknowledge the justness of my claim upon him?"

"You may kill him and welcome," promptly responded Captain Moonshine. "So that he is killed, I'm not particular about doing the job myself. But I don't want him to die too soon. He has a secret that he must reveal. You can't object to our putting him through a little course of sprouts, before you polish him off."

"Even if he had been torn deaf and dumb, he should hear and answer any question you may put to him," said the desperado, with a ferocious laugh. "I'll inflict torture enough, never fear—for I mean to skin him alive, inch by inch!"

Reckless, malignant though he undeniably was, Captain Moonshine drew back with an involuntary shudder as these words dropped from the lips of the desperado. To be flayed alive! The punishment far exceeded anything his fertile fancy had pictured. Yet neither he nor his comrades uttered any remonstrance as Idaho Ira strode swiftly up to the bound and helpless prisoner, his bared knife glittering ominously in the silvery rays of the smiling moon.

Enoch Dodge had overheard all, and felt that his end was nigh at hand, but even with such fiendish torture in prospective, his bold spirit did not quail. His eyes undauntedly met those of the desperado, and a cold smile curled his thin lips as the bared blade gleamed before his face.

"Let up on your monkeyin', an' do your dirty work, critter," he said, grimly. "I'm only sorry that you wasn't by at the time I hung your brother whelp, so the same rope could 'a' ended the pizen breed forever!"

If his desperate purpose was to provoke the fellow into slaying him outright, it appeared that Enoch Dodge had gained his end, for, with a low, snarling cry, Idaho Ira closed with him, his knife making two strokes in swift succession.

Loud, angry cries burst from the lips of Captain Moonshine and his men, for they believed that the desperado had slain the prisoner, thus destroying their last hope of obtaining the precious document they estimated so highly.

Mad with fury they darted forward to tear the slayer from his victim, but with a sharp yell Idaho Ira turned and leaped upon them, burying his knife to the very hilt in the brawny throat of Wolf, its keen point ranging downward and cleaving his heart in twain!

Swift as thought in his emotions, Idaho Ira leaped on a pace, then wheeled with a brace of revolvers in his hands, confronting the amazed road-agents.

Crack—crack! and two of their number flung aloft their hands and spun around in death, a bullet crashing through the brain of each. Then, dropping one pistol and hurling the other into the face of the fourth outlaw with a force that knocked him backward into the vigorous arms of Enoch Dodge, Idaho Ira leaped upon Captain Moonshine like a hungry panther, gripping his throat and bearing him backward to the ground with resistless might and crushing force!

The breath driven completely out of his body by the fall and the added weight of Idaho Ira, Captain Moonshine fell an easy victim to his assailant. Turning his head, Idaho Ira saw that Enoch Dodge had also overpowered his antagonist, overthrowing him and thumping his head against the rocks until he was senseless.

"Pick up the cercs I cut, and bind this fellow, Dodge," said Ira, in a remarkably friendly tone for one who had declared himself such a bitter enemy but a few minutes before. "It's worth double the risk, you know, to capture Captain Moonshine."

But even as he spoke a curse of astonishment and bitter fury escaped his lips. In his hand he held the black mask which had screened the face of his captive—but with it came loose the jetty beard, revealing the stubbly chin and bloated face of Billy Cooper, the drunken sot and bummer!

Enoch Dodge stared aghast, unable to believe the evidence of his eyesight. Surely there must be witchcraft in this! or else the devil was striving to shield his favorite son!

"Kin it be that Drunken Billy hes bin playin' us fer fools all this time—that he is Cap'n Moonshine?" he gasped.

"No," grated Idaho Ira, savagely. "It is the coyote masquerading in the grizzly's hide. But no doubt he is a member of the band, and, as such, worth taking care of. He can be made to equal with proper pinching, and to some purpose. Truss up your game, and then lead up the horses."

Idaho Ira, while Enoch Dodge was obeying orders, removed the masks from the faces of each of the dead outlaws, and closely scanned them by the clear moonlight. Then searching their bodies, he coolly rolled them over into the abyss which they had planned should be the tomb of Enoch Dodge.

The two outlaws were lifted into the saddle and each bound there in much the same manner as they had served the marshal. And then Idaho Ira and Enoch Dodge turned their faces toward Grenada, leading their prisoners and the two extra horses.

Not a word passed between them after the road-agents recovered their senses, and no pause was made except to insert a gag between the jaws of their prisoners, until the outskirts of the town were reached.

For some minutes they had been aware that something unusual was afoot, or had occurred in Grenada, for the town seemed fairly wild with excitement. Resolved not to endanger the safety of his captives, Enoch Dodge bade his comrade draw rein, while he rode on to investigate.

Almost the first man he met was the one detailed from the police force as a special guard over Bruiser Bill. His head was bare, and his face one mask of blood. He was terribly excited, but managed to make a tolerably clear report.

According to orders, he was inside the calaboose, keeping vigilant watch and ward over the delirious prisoner, keenly listening for some valuable clue to drop from his lips amid the wild ravings, when the door was suddenly flung open and half a dozen armed, masked men sprung inside.

He was knocked down and trampled over, a knife thrust into his side, but this fortunately glanced from a rib and only inflicted a painful flesh wound. The breath was driven from his body, and he lay like a dead man, unable to give the alarm, while the masked men hastily picked up the prisoner and bore him outside, placing him upon a led horse.

By this time he, the guard, recovered sufficiently to crawl to the door, when he found the dead body of the jailer, his throat cut from ear to ear, nearly severing his head from his body, and a deep gash over his heart.

Drawing his revolver, he opened fire upon the party of rescuers, who were just riding away, and shouted forth the alarm at the top of his voice. The wild uproar seemed to still further craze Bruiser Bill, who began fighting his friends, finally flinging himself from the mill.

By this time a crowd was gathering from every direction, and seeing that they could not overpower Bill in time to bear him away before they were inextricably surrounded, one of the masked men put a bullet through the madman's brain, killing him instantly. Then, forming a bold front, and burning powder freely, the masked riders burst through the excited crowd and rode rapidly away through the night, leaving several dead and more wounded behind them.

A company was raised and pursuit made as quickly as possible, but the unavoidable delay rendered the ultimate escape of the bold rescuers almost a certainty.

The marshal was not as vexed as he would have been, had he not two more of the execrable band in his power, and hastily calling around him a posse of men on whom he could depend, he returned to where Idaho Ira was awaiting him with the two captives. These he escorted to the calaboose, removing the gags from their jaws, but leaving both hands and feet bound for the present. Two trusty men were detailed for inside guard duty, and a dozen others to watch without, quite as much to hold the excited mob in check as through any expectation of another bold attempt at a rescue.

"Send those two men outside for the present, mate," said Idaho Ira, coolly. "Lock me up an hour with these fellows, but give your jailer orders to let me out when I give the signal. I think maybe I can learn something of these chickens, worth noting down."

The marshal appeared not a little surprised by the request, but without a word of remonstrance, obeyed.

When the door was closed and locked, Idaho Ira drew near the captives, squatting down before them, peering into their faces as though bent on reading their innermost thoughts.

At length he appeared satisfied, for he drew erect with a low, mocking laugh parting his lips.

"So! I felt sure that I had seen you before, John Doyle!"

The bumster who had masqueraded as Captain Moonshine uttered a low cry, while an expression of abject fear settled over his features, flushing his pimpled visage to a dirty, livid pallor.

"A bank robber in St. Louis—a wife murderer in Omaha—a horse-thief and road-agent everywhere, makes a black record for one man, John Doyle, alias William Cooper!"

"It is a lie—I deny it all!" gasped the craven-looking wretch.

"The evidence of your face would hang you in any court, John Doyle," and Idaho Ira laughed coldly. "Chew that sweet morsel while I whisper a word to Fred Howe."

Once again, though in a lesser degree, was terror and amazement written upon the features of the man who thus heard his real, long-buried name uttered by the lips of a stranger.

"Who are you? the devil himself?" he growled, hoarsely.

"If not the devil in person, I don't know but what I may call myself his friend, since I have been the means of sending him many a faithful servant as summer boarders," laughed Idaho Ira. "But let that pass. I am here on business."

"You know now that I can give evidence sufficient to hang you a dozen times over, provided you had as many lives, even if we fail to prove that you belong to Captain Moonshine's band. And hang you shall, as sure as there is a heaven above us, unless you purchase life and liberty by betraying your master and his mates into the hands of justice. To show you that I mean what I say, and to prove that I have the power to save your lives, if you turn state's evidence—see!"

As he spoke Idaho Ira pulled two quills, wrapped round with cotton, from his nostrils, allowing his nose to resume its natural shape, then took a pair of plumpers from the inside of his cheeks. Lifting his hat, he took off a heavy black wig and then stood before them undisguised, save for the bronze dye upon his skin.

"DAN BROWN, OF DENVER, at your service," he said, mockingly.

CHAPTER XV.

A DESPERATE EXPEDIENT.

"PROGRESSING backward" is about as unpleasant in reading a story as it is in real life, but in order to satisfactorily explain the transformation of a dead and publicly buried corpse into an exceedingly live man—if "Dan Brown, of Denver" into "Idaho Ira," a brief retrospective glance at this point becomes unavoidable.

It will be remembered that in the duel between "the young man from Boston," the principals stood upon tables placed close to the side walls, confronting each other's fire-arms with only the width of the room between them.

Viewed from the front door, the table occupied by Dan Brown was on the right hand side of the room, and thus his left side and breast were fully exposed to the aim of the hidden assassin, thanks to his elevated position. Had the duelists stood upon the floor, that dastard shot could not have been fired, as the eager spectators stood several rows deep between the door and the detective.

It may be stated in this connection that Frank Blackwood fired that treacherous shot.

The prompt closing and securing of the doors by orders of Enoch Dodge, prevented the tidings of the double duel from spreading outside, and hence no curious crowd gathered there. And at the critical moment, Frank Blackwood saw that the street in his immediate vicinity was utterly deserted.

He had seen and heard enough to know that Bruiser Bill was either dead or defeated, and as the duelists took up their positions, he first felt the temptation to which he afterward yielded. Knowing that the disguised detective was an unerring shot, he felt sure that Bricktop would be killed. There was an equal chance that both shots would be fatal, but so resolved was he to put the daring detective out of the way forever, that he drew and leveled his revolver, firing directly at the heart of the detective at the word, hoping that his treacherous act would be hidden for the present, at least, by the double explosion of the duelists' pistols.

He saw both men reel and fall, but to his horror he saw that the pistol grasped by Bricktop had failed to explode! Knowing that discovery and pursuit would be immediate, he dashed across the street and entered the door that led up to his chambers before any one emerged from the Shades. And then, from his room above he watched and softly laughed at the eager, threatening crowd as they vainly searched for the bold assassin.

As stated at the time, Enoch Dodge rushed to the side of his fallen friend, and a cry of fierce despair broke from his lips as he saw the red blood widening and deepening the ghastly stain directly over the heart.

Tearing open vest and shirt, he saw that the assassin's bullet had sped terribly true to its murderous aim. There was no sign of the lead. The wound bled profusely. The stricken man lay pale as death and as motionless. But then came a faint, barely audible whisper from his lips:

"Get me to the hotel—I am dying—quick!"

Almost shaking with grief, the marshal directed the preparation of a rude litter while temporarily bandaging the wound of his friend. A cot was procured, and upon it, with a blanket in addition to his own coat thrown over him, the disguised detective was tenderly borne to the Golden Eagle and at once carried into the marshal's private office.

Enoch Dodge was about to send messengers

after every doctor and surgeon in town, but a faint whisper from the wounded man checked him. Bending his ear low, he heard:

"Clear the room of all save ourselves."

This was quickly done, Dodge bidding his bar-keeper give the men the freedom of the bar, and then the door was closed and locked, after which the apparently dying man beckoned the marshal to draw nearer.

"Now don't yell out and arouse the suspicions of those fellows outside," uttered Dan Brown—for "the young man from Boston" was indeed that widely-celebrated detective—coolly rising to a sitting posture, and looking extremely unlike a dying man!

Amazed, dumbfounded, Enoch Dodge could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes, and it was not until the detective arose and stood fairly upon his feet, grasping his horny palm with a steel-like gripe, that he began to realize the joyful truth.

"The cunning rascal meant well enough," said Dan Brown, with a low laugh, as he touched the blood spot upon his left breast. "Straight for the heart, and driven by a heavy charge of powder, too! It was the third time, but the charm was only partially broken—see!"

As he spoke he drew some blood-stained papers from a pocket inside his undershirt, and from an envelope he extracted an oblong strip of tempered steel. This had rested directly over the region of his heart. Upon it were perceptible two dents, and one ragged hole where the bullet of Frank Blackwood had forced its passage.

Three times had that bit of steel saved the life of its wearer!

"The heavy shock paralyzed me, and knocked me over," continued the detective. "For a little time I felt that my time had come, but then as you laid bare the wound, I knew better. I feared to explain then, you were so fearfully excited. I knew you would blurt out the truth before you thought. For that reason I played bugs on you, and gave you all this trouble—because this night Dan Brown of Denver must die!"

Utterly bewildered, Enoch Dodge dropped down upon the cot, staring at his friend in helpless amazement.

Laughing low and musically, Dan Brown seated himself beside the marshal, and in plain, simple terms, as though talking to a child, he divulged a truly amazing project and gave his reasons therefor.

He had come to Grenada for the express purpose of hunting down and destroying the band of road-agents and reckless assassins under the leadership of Captain Moonshine. A strange chain of unavoidable circumstances had revealed his identity much sooner than he intended, and he knew from the desperate events of that night that no pains would be spared to take his life. For that reason, and the more completely to throw the enemy off his guard, his quick wit saw that by a desperate expedient, that attempted assassination could be turned to good use.

"Is there a doctor or surgeon in town that you can implicitly trust to hold his tongue and sacredly preserve a dangerous secret? If so, send for him. Suspicious that all was not on the square, might be aroused were I to die without being seen by some medical man."

Enoch Dodge, by this time more like his usual self, did know of such a person, and a messenger was dispatched for him at once. While awaiting his arrival, with locked doors, the detective still further revealed the startling plan he had so hastily conceived.

The surgeon came, was sworn to solemn secrecy, and then made a partner in the plot. And he proved a faithful as well as valuable confederate, too.

By his aid, a subtle drug was procured which, taken inwardly, would produce the perfect appearance of death for at least six hours. The skin would be pale and cold. The heart would suspend its functions, and only a close examination by professional experts could detect the imposition, until the effects of the drug wore off of itself.

During the remaining hours of darkness, the minor details were arranged and thoroughly understood. A coffin was procured, by the aid of the doctor and two members of the police force, whom Enoch Dodge knew he could trust implicitly, and whose help was essential to the complete success of the ruse.

The reader will remember how all save the four men who "pulled the wires," were deceived by the open exhibition made of the seeming corpse detective. It will also be remembered that Frank Blackwood never once lost sight of the coffin until after it was placed in the hearse; but, despite his cunning watch, he was not completely befuddled, for Dan Brown was not in the coffin when it was borne out doors by the six men.

The table upon which the coffin rested was covered with a heavy cloth that touched the floor all around, and beneath this two policemen—these who had assisted in procuring the coffin—were concealed while Enoch Dodge was delivering his unique funeral sermon.

The moment the marshal replaced the lid and

began screwing it down, after the assembled crowd had viewed the supposed corpse, these two hidden men performed their part of the given comedy, what slight noise they made being drowned by the movements of the anxious crowd.

A hole nearly as long and as wide as the coffin had been sawed in the table. The cloth was also cut at both ends and one side. The top of table was lowered, hanging on hinges. The bottom of the coffin was arranged in the same manner. The hooks fastening this were removed, the bottom lowered and the lifeless body of the detective caught in their arms, then rested upon the floor. A long, stout bag, heavily stuffed with meal and weighted with quartz, was now raised up and secured to the hanging bottom of the coffin by stout straps arranged for that purpose. This was now swung back into place and hooked fast; the table top and cloth replaced, and all was in readiness before Enoch Dodge drove the last screw firmly home.

When the "funeral" departed, the insensible detective was placed upon a couch and left to recover his senses at the proper time.

This did not occur until after Enoch Dodge had been lured away by the cunning bummer, Billy Cooper, and after disguising himself and waiting until his patience was exhausted, Dan Brown wrote a brief note cautiously explaining his plans as far as he cared to, then left the hotel, watching his chance and slipping out without attracting any attention, though his disguise was absolutely perfect.

As "Idaho Ira," he intended to try and join the band under leadership of Captain Moonshine, and at the proper time deliver them up to offended justice.

With this purpose he was ranging through the rocky fastnesses, somewhere in which he believed the road-agents had located themselves, when he caught sight of the party having Enoch Dodge in charge. Stealthily creeping upon them, desirous to learn beyond doubt who and what they were, his amazement may be imagined when he found his old friend a prisoner in the hands of a bitter enemy.

He, too, was deceived by the admirable acting of the disguised bummer, and resolved to play a desperate game in order to capture the prime object of his trailing.

How he played his part has been seen. It was rendered the more difficult from the marshal's failing to recognize him in his admirable disguise and perfect acting. The taunt uttered by Dodge, with a view to an escape from the threatened torture by provoking a speedy death-blow, was seriously uttered, but the counterfeit "Idaho Ira" promptly turned it to good account, and revealing his identity as he severed the bonds that confined his friend, under pretense of slaying him. The marshal, though greatly amazed, played his part well in the tragedy that succeeded the bit of comedy.

Acting upon a sudden impulse, believing that he could thereby frighten the two prisoners into making the confession he demanded as the price of their life, the detective threw off his disguise and announced himself to them as what he really was.

Their amazement was intense, and their dread of the detective increased in due proportion, but still he failed to wring the desired information from their lips.

"I will see you again to-morrow," he said, finally. "Before that visit make up your minds to confess all you know concerning Captain Moonshine and his men, or I swear that you shall never see another day dawn! One word will set the mob on fire, and if they ever lay hands upon you, you will be torn limb from limb. Remember—to-morrow!"

With this, Dan Brown gave the signal and was permitted to leave the prison, hastening at once to the Golden Eagle.

The guard detailed for the inside entered and released the lower limbs of their captives. For a time they were vigilant enough, but then sleep weighed down their eyelids. The jail was guarded by at least a dozen men. The prisoners were bound and helpless. There could be no harm in their taking "forty winks."

So they reasoned, but just before dawn, a guarded signal came from outside the grated window, and noiselessly Billy Cooper crept to the ventilator, whispering softly into the ear of his friend outside:

"Go and warn the captain. Dan Brown of Denver is alive and hunting us down. He must be killed, or we are lost!"

CHAPTER XVI.

RACHEL IN DANGER.

In a silence that was more stern and ominous than loud and angry speech, the Vigilantes released the mangled corpse of James Kintner from the end of the avenger's lasso, and then dug a shallow grave beneath the death-tree. He was unmarried and, so far as any of those present knew, had no living relative. It was a rude burial, but there were sincerely sorrowing hearts around as the battered shell was forever hidden from mortal view.

There was ample time for all this. The hounds had seen their trail to its end, and with the scent

of fresh blood in their nostrils, they could not be made to take up the trail left by the bold avenger as he rode away from his hanging victim.

Nothing more could be done until daylight came to aid them, and slowly, gloomily, the Vigilantes rode back to the Crabtree ranch. Here they dismounted but did not uncaparison their horses. Twice the desperate avenger had dealt a blow; it was barely possible that those two escapes would lead him back to make a third attempt.

To insure his death or capture in case of such a venture, half a dozen men armed to the teeth, stole away from the rest and surrounded the buildings at a distance, lying close to the ground with rifles in readiness. But all those precautions proved needless. The dread avenger seemed satisfied with the bloody work he had already done, and the new day was born without the expected denouement.

A hearty breakfast had been cooked and eaten; food was stowed away by each member of the Vigilantes, and then they mounted and rode away toward the grove, intending to take the trail of the avenger and follow it to the bitter end.

Frank Blackwood insisted on bearing them company, as did also young David Crabtree. To equalize this, though there was but little danger of any attack upon the ranch or those left behind, two of the company were detailed as guards.

There was some difficulty in placing the hounds on the trail of the avenger, and as the hoof marks were clear and distinct, the company set forward, riding by sight. What success they met with will be shown in the proper time and place.

Ezra Blackwood remained at the ranch, in anything but a blissful humor. The entire alteration in the manner and habits of his life, at his age, bore heavily upon him, and despite the magnitude of the stake for which he was playing, more than once on that bright morning he caught himself wondering if the fortune he expected to gain was worth all this risk, trouble and discomfort of both mind and body.

Ruth had passed a terrible night. In the midnight assassin she believed she had recognized both the figure and the voice of her lover—almost husband. Knowing that now a double barrier of blood was raised between them forever, she was almost crazed. But then, as the day dawned, her over-wrought brain yielded to the soothing influence of opiates, and she fell asleep.

Rachel, who had not removed her clothes that night, now lay down and took a nap, only awakening when David Crabtree returned from the man-hunt, in company with Frank Blackwood, who, he explained, had been suddenly taken ill while on the trail, and being ignorant of the route to the ranch, he, David, had volunteered as guide. The young lawyer lay down to rest, declaring himself much better, already.

An hour later David, who appeared to have taken a strong fancy for his beautiful cousin, persuaded her to go out for a ride, declaring that a brisk gallop over the plain would be the very thing to restore the faded roses to her cheeks.

Being passionately fond of equestrian exercise, it was not very difficult to persuade Rachel that there was not the slightest danger, and donning her riding habit, the maiden who was a wife in name, at least, soon found herself in the saddle and racing swiftly over the level prairie.

When free from his father's oppressive presence, David Crabtree could be gay, cheerful and a particularly pleasant companion, as Rachel now discovered, and her depressed spirits were speedily elevated by his animated talk.

That pleasure ride was destined to be a memorable one on more accounts than one.

The cousins were slowly riding along the little used road that wound through the timber bordering the river, at a point some two miles distant from the ranch, conversing gaily, when a horseman spurred around an abrupt bend in the road and confronted them with a leveled revolver.

"Halt!" he cried sternly. "Make a move forward or to retreat, and a blue pill settles your accounts, youngster!"

A gasp of horror parted the lips of the maiden as her face turned deathly pale and her eyes widely dilated, for in the man who blocked their way, she believed she could recognize the form and general appearance of the man whom she had so recklessly wedded—Captain Moonshine, the dreaded outlaw. There was the long, glossy black beard moving in the breeze, and though a heavy crape mask concealed his features, she felt that she was gazing upon her husband!

David Crabtree was also startled, but in a brief space he recovered himself and showed no little of the high-courage that distinguished his sire.

Disregarding both the leveled weapon and threats of the masked rider, he whipped out his revolver and urged his horse forward.

The onset was so sudden that the outlaw

seemed taken by surprise, and though his pistol was hastily discharged, the bullet whistled harmlessly past the ear of the charging youth who, with a courage and coolness rare in one so young, held his fire until the muzzle of his cocked revolver was thrust almost against the broad breast of his antagonist.

The outlaw seemed doomed to death, and had the lad's revolver proved faithful, a corpse would speedily have cumbered the ground; but as the hammer fell, only the cap exploded.

With a fierce curse, the outlaw grappled with David, tearing him from the saddle and shaking the pistol from his grasp at the same time. The lad struggled desperately, but he was no more than a child in the deadly grasp of his muscular antagonist. A sinewy hand was fastened upon his throat, and in a few moments his struggles ceased and he hung limp and motionless as dead.

Such appeared to be the thoughts of the outlaw, for with a short, sinister laugh, he allowed the body to drop to the ground, where it lay in a heap.

As David made his bold dash forward, the spell which bound Rachel was broken, and with a sobbing cry of terror, she wrenched her horse's head around with the intention of seeking safety in precipitate flight. But before she could do more, a second horseman broke cover and quickly grasped her bridle-rein, mastering her mount almost immediately.

He also was masked, and sat his horse quietly, looking upon the fierce if brief struggle in which his fellow was engaged, seemingly having full confidence in the powers of his friend, since he made no move toward lending his assistance. The result justified his action, and the victor rode forward to the side of the terrified maiden with a short, hard laugh of reckless triumph.

"Go take a look around, Grizzly, and make sure that we are not interrupted without ample warning. I will attend to the lady. We have a little private business to transact."

Rachel shuddered and closed her eyes, feeling faint and sick at heart. It was the same deep, peculiar voice which she had noted when her husband first addressed her.

"Look here, my lady," uttered the outlaw, in a harsh voice. "I'm not very tender skinned, but I don't like to see such an expression upon the face of my bride! You married me of your own accord, and with your eyes open. If you have been listening to evil advisers, close your ears to their words, after this, or it will be the worse for all concerned."

Despair lent Rachel a degree of courage which surprised herself, and rallying, she sternly replied:

"I was a fool then—blinded by a silly girl's romantic folly. I began to realize my fatal mistake the moment those irrevocable words were spoken. An unutterable horror of you and yours came over me—and that feeling has only deepened and grown stronger ever since."

"And then you lied to me. You claimed to be my best friend. You solemnly swore that you would never approach me—would never molest me or make any attempt at asserting your rights as a—my—husband—"

Here her voice faltered, and she ceased speaking. Her face was deathly pale, and a feeling of faintness was stealing over her. But with a powerful exercise of will, she fought against the illness, and conquered it.

"There are two sides to that question," sharply retorted Captain Moonshine. "At the very altar you eloped from me in company with my deadliest enemy. And not only that, but you robbed me as well. Both together was enough to ruffle the temper of the most indulgent husband in life."

"Only for that double insult and injury, my pledge would have been solemnly kept. And even now, if you restore that certificate, or give me information which will result in my finding the document, I am ready to renew that pledge and keep it to the very letter from now henceforward."

"What I told you night before last, I now repeat," said Rachel, firmly, the time consumed by the outlaw in speaking having enabled her to conquer her weakness and command her voice. "I know nothing of the paper—but if I did, I would not tell you. Why are you so anxious to obtain possession of it? It can only be to make an evil use of it—"

While she was speaking, the road-agent abruptly stood erect in his stirrups, his dark eyes flashing through the opening in his mask as a short, sharp whistle came to his ears, accompanied by the rapid trampling of horses' hoofs.

Rachel heard the same sound, and seeing that Captain Moonshine had released her bridle-rein while talking, a desperate resolve rapidly shaped itself in her brain. The excitement of Captain Moonshine on hearing that signal and the accompanying sounds, convinced her that aid was close at hand, and striking her horse a sharp blow with the whip, she urged it along the back track.

A wild yell of rage burst from the lips of the road-agent, as he darted forward in swift pursuit, almost instantly overtaking the fugitive and wrenching up both horses with his iron grasp.

At that moment the second outlaw burst through the bushes, and uttered a loud cry of warning. Captain Moonshine attempted to turn his captive's horse around to flee, but the animal was greatly excited and stubbornly resisted. Then a horseman came in view around the turn, and taking in the situation at a glance, immediately opened fire upon the outlaws as he boldly charged down upon them.

At the first shot, the second outlaw, who had wheeled beside his leader, and was leveling a revolver, uttered a fierce curse as his pistol hand fell suddenly to his side. The courage seemed completely taken out of him by this mishap, and wheeling his horse once more, he dashed away at breakneck speed.

Crack—crack in swift succession spoke the revolver of the bold rescuer, and reeling in his saddle, with a horrible yell of bitter agony, Captain Moonshine fell forward upon the neck of his horse, which sped swiftly away after the other road-agent.

So rapidly had all this transpired that almost ere Rachel could realize the fact, she was free, and a friendly voice was uttering encouraging words in her ear. Then her tensely strained nerves gave way, and as a dizzy blackness whirled around her senses, she would have fallen from the saddle only for the support lent her by strong arms.

Her swoon lasted only for a few minutes, then her eyes opened and she recognized the pale, anxious face of Frank Blackwood bending over her, while David Crabtree, sobbing softly, was nervously clapping her cold hands.

"There is nothing more to fear, Rachel," said Frank, soothingly. "The scoundrels have fled and are now far away, unless they have dropped dead from the saddle. Be calm. You are safe, now. A thousand such rascals could not do you harm as long as I draw the breath of life."

The ardent gaze which he bent upon her pale face, spoke far more plainly than his words, and with a faint flush Rachel gently withdrew herself from his arms.

"Catch the horses, David," said Blackwood, also rising.

Apparently but little the worse for his choking, the lad at once obeyed, and taking advantage of his absence, Frank said:

"Am I right in my surmise that one of those men was the notorious road-agent, Captain Moonshine?"

Rachel bowed. Just then she could not trust herself to speak.

"In strict confidence, father told me all that occurred on night before last. He admitted that all the necessary forms were complied with, and that the marriage was a strictly legal one. Yet both he and I are confident that the bond can be broken, if you will only give us full permission to fight your battle. Rachel, my dear playmate, for *your* sake—to win one kind word from your lips, I could perform even a more arduous task than that. Tell me—"

His speech was cut short by the return of David with the horses, nor was Rachel sorry. There was an ardent glow in the eyes of the young lawyer that confused while it vaguely alarmed her, and she was only too glad of an excuse for evading a reply, until she had somewhat composed her mind.

Frank tenderly lifted her into the saddle, and they turned their faces toward the not distant ranch. There were few words spoken. All seemed seriously impressed by the exciting scenes through which they had passed. But as they rode along, there was a tender, devoted air about every little attention which the young lawyer was able to show Rachel, that painfully embarrassed the young lady, and made her very glad when the door of the Crabtree ranch was gained.

Mrs. Crabtree came forth to welcome their return, and she was accompanied by a slight, delicate-looking lady, in whose eyes a look of unmistakable horror gradually deepened as she caught a fair view of Frank Blackwood's face. Nor was he much less agitated. It was as though some haunting vision of the past had unexpectedly risen up to accuse him!

CHAPTER XVII.

A WRONGED WOMAN'S HATRED.

EVEN Mrs. Crabtree could not help but notice the strong emotion which mutually seized upon her two guests, and while one motherly arm was unobtrusively passed around the young lady's waist as a support, she gave them both time to recover some degree of composure by introducing the stranger first to Rachel and then to Frank Blackwood.

The young lawyer was the first to recover his natural audacity, for he saw that their weapons were not far from equal, and the case far more favorable than he at first believed. He saw, too, that Rachel was eying him closely and wonderingly. The strong excitement and agitation which he had involuntarily exhibited at this unexpected resurrection of the dark past, he felt had injured him in her estimation, just when he desired to stand the highest, and he made a bold stroke to retrieve his slip.

"I must seem a very poor to you ladies," he said, with a faint laugh. "Indeed, I am hardly myself. Something very like a syncope this

morning, then the excitement of our little adventure with the road-agents, and now the unexpected meeting with one whom I have mourned as dead for years—all taken together, has proved a little too much for my brain."

"Then Mrs. Gill—with whom I had the pleasure of journeying from Denver almost to Grenada—and you have met before?" asked Rachel, her vague suspicion vanishing.

"When she was some years younger than now—but not more beautiful—yes," responded Blackwood, with a low bow as they entered the house together. "Until now I believed her dead, and from the strong agitation she displayed, no doubt she was as terribly deceived—I am I right, Agnes?"

"No—I knew you were living," came the response from the pale, statuesque woman, in low but strangely cold tones.

"Then you must have believed me false—"

"No—I knew it," Mrs. Gill uttered in the same tone.

Blackwood breathed a soft sigh, and his fair face clouded.

"Ah, our mutual enemies knew me better than to attack me on that point. They would have failed. Nothing but the evidence of my own eyesight could have convinced me that you were false. It is a painful story, ladies," he added, turning to Rachel and Mrs. Crabtree, who were feeling far from at ease at having this peculiar scene thrust upon them. "A very painful story of treachery and wrong-doing. You will excuse me, I know, from entering into details. Enough that, some years ago, this lady, now the happy wife of our mutual friend, John Gill, and I were very dear friends—lovers in fact. Though in ignorance of the fact, those who pretended to be our truest friends, were really enemies, and plotted secretly for our separation. In the end they succeeded—but why say more? The past is past—let it die away again if that be possible."

Through all this hurried, almost incoherent explanation, Mrs. Agnes Gill sat with her great dark eyes fixed upon the speaker. There was not a trace of color in her face. A statue of marble could not be colder or more unmoved in outward appearance, save once when Rachel saw her thin lip curl scornfully as she thought, when Frank Blackwood attempted an extra touch of the pathetic. And seeing that, the maiden's suspicions of something evil hidden under all this, returned to her mind with redoubled force. What ground the young lawyer had gained in her good graces by his bold, dashing conduct that day, was now more than lost by this equivocal situation.

Mrs. Gill was the first to break up the uncomfortable sitting. Arising, she declared that she must return home. That she had only ridden over to inquire how Ruth was getting along, her husband having reported her sudden illness when he rode home for a few minutes during the past night, and bidden her pay a neighborly visit to see if she could be of any service.

After a brief interchange of civilities, which need not be recorded here, Mrs. Gill turned to Frank Blackwood and with a smile that fairly transfigured her pale face, said:

"Will you be so kind as to escort me home, Mr. Blackwood? After your terrible adventure of this morning, I am almost afraid to ride so far alone."

Again Rachel fancied there was more in the words than appeared on the surface; that the request was a command, though admirably disguised. She thought, too, that the young lawyer was reluctant to accept, though his response was admirable in its courtesy.

A few minutes later the twain were in the saddle and riding slowly over the plain toward the cattle ranch of honest Jack Gill.

Now that there were no other eyes upon them the truth was plainly revealed in their faces, tones and actions.

"So, my lady," said Blackwood, first breaking the silence, and speaking in a coarse, hard tone that corresponded well with the brutal expression upon his face, "you have laid yourself open to the charge of bigamy!"

"If so, you are the only person living who can prove the crime, and utterly devilish as you are, you dare not bring the charge against me," was the firm response, and as she spoke, the woman's eyes glittered like living coals. "The balance of power is in my hands now!"

Rachel's intuitions had not deceived her. There was a bond between these two people, and nearly every word of the explanation volunteered by Frank Blackwood was a lie.

Years before, when both were young, he and this woman, then a gay, laughter-loving, spoiled child, had first met. Handsome, gifted with a strong magnetism and many qualities that carry most women by storm, the young lawyer wooed and won Agnes Dorgan, but it was more from a desire to finger the money of her father than for love of herself.

In this he was fated to disappointment. There came a disastrous season, followed by a panic and crash in business circles. Among the houses that went to pieces was that of Miles Dorgan, and when his affairs came to be wound up, it was found that every thing was lost—even her

The old merchant did not long survive. The disgrace proved more than he could bear, and one morning he was found dead in bed. His wife buried him, and then quietly faded away, the end of the month finding Agnes an orphan.

Frank, too, was involved. He had put his little fortune into the business, intending it to turn out golden nest-eggs. It was swallowed up by the wreck, and as the cloud of suspicion also hung over him, he soon found himself obliged to leave the city, and went further West.

Always gay and inclined to dissipation, Blackwood went rapidly to the bad, making his living by gambling and still more questionable practices. He grew brutal and moody at home, often openly cursing his folly in tying himself to a weak, sniveling woman. Nor was there much change for the better when a little later came to them.

It is an unpleasant picture, and as rapidly as possible we pass over it.

Matters went from bad to worse, until Frank Blackwood committed a crime that caused him to flee the town, finally bringing up in Denver. It was at this place that he put the cap-sheaf to his villainy by deserting his wife and child, leaving them penniless and friendless in a strange city.

"No doubt you thought I would die of grief, or else commit suicide in my despair," said Agnes Gill, in the cold, hard tone she had maintained throughout. "But there you were mistaken. So long as you remained with me, I was your humble, willing slave, incapable of taking an independent step; but with you went the diabolical magnetism which had made me your blind thrall—and for the first time I saw you in your real colors. And then I was glad that you were gone. Still, had I only myself to think for, it may be that I would have done as you doubtless wished—have set you free by filling suicide's grave. But there was my child; and for it I fought the terrible battle for bread."

"Of all that I endured, when winter came on, I do not care to speak. The mere thought arouses a dangerous devil in my heart—anxious to me, to you, to all around me! When I then suffered turned me from a God-fearing woman into something close akin to a fiend. And yet, while baby lived, I was not all bad. It was the one link that bound me to humanity."

"It took sick that cold and terrible winter. It had a strong constitution, and with proper nourishment, would have lived. But there was only one way in which that nourishment could be procured. At times I was powerfully tempted, but as often the good angel that looked from baby's hollow eyes, held me back."

"Bah! why linger over the story? You do not care—all I could say would not bring on a look of shame to your brazen cheek, one tear of remorse to your eye!"

"Baby died—starved to death. And its blood rests upon your head, together with a mother's curse!"

Through all this, Frank Blackwood listened with a hard, cynical smile upon his face. The woman spoke truly. He did not care. His heart was hardened beyond feeling remorse. It was well that the little one was gone. He only felt regret that the mother had not borne it company into the grave.

Yet he was wise enough to keep these reflections close between his teeth. He saw that she was terribly excited, and he knew that one unlucky word might prove the last feather.

"I was ill to death's door for months, and awoke to find myself in a hospital," resumed Mrs. Gill, once more in that cold, monotonous voice. "As I lay there recovering slowly, I made a vow. I would never do anything that could give you grounds for obtaining a divorce. As soon as I was able, I would hunt you up, learn all the black secrets of your life, and then hover near you, ready to foil your dearest plans, and expose you when you fancied yourself the most secure. But I found it easier to plan than to execute."

"I was discharged from the hospital, cured but miserably weak and penniless. As best I could, I fought the hard fight, only the hope of being avenged upon you for all my suffering and wrongs keeping me from sinking by the wayside."

"Slowly I regained my strength, and some remnants of my former beauty and gracefulness of form. You remember how, in the days when you came courting, you used to praise my voice and execution. Those talents I now turned to good use—and became a favorite balladist in a variety hall! And not only that, but under my rightful name, as *your* wife!"

A fierce, grating curse broke from the woman's lips, and an angry red spot came out on her cheek. The woman laughed icily as she saw how true the poisoned shaft had sped home.

"That was only for a brief time. The rascal was astute, and he knew that a 'mistake' drew better than a 'madam,' so he offered me a slight increase of salary if I would change my name, and I did so. Money was my god, then, for it promised me revenge upon you!"

"The life was a horrible one. I, like the rest of the girls, was deemed fair game by all the habitués of the place. Day by day, I selected

of it, and then, when a woman whom I intrusted with all my savings, disappeared, leaving no sign, I broke down.

"Then come a noble-hearted man to the rescue; rough, uncouth and illiterate, but still one of nature's nobleman."

"Old Jack Gill, I suppose?" sneered Blackwood.

"Yes. Sneer if you will. He is an honest man, while you are a thrice-dyed criminal, a liar—everything that is mean and evil and despicable. Bah! I care not for your ugly looks. You left me to battle for myself, and I have not forgotten how. I could and would shoot you like a mad-dog—only I do not wish to bring shame and sorrow upon him—my husband."

"The courts would hardly decide him that," sneered the lawyer.

"Perhaps not; but you dare not invoke their aid. I know enough of your crimes to bring you to the gallows, and at your first crooked step, I swear that I will make all known."

There could be no doubting her earnestness. Blackwood saw this, and deemed it wise to temporize for the present.

"As you say, it would be suicidal for us both, to attempt revenge now," he said, slowly. "So long as you do not molest me, so long is your secret safe in my keeping."

"Not for my own sake, nor yet for yours, but for that of the noble-hearted man who took me from the very hot-bed of vice, believing my story without a question, I agree to preserve an armed truce. But, only on one condition. I know your failings. I suspect you are plotting against the peace or fortune of that lady—Miss Trowbridge. If so, abandon your schemes. If you do aught of evil to her, or to Ruth Crabtree, or any other woman, the moment I hear of it, I will place the proof of your crimes in the hands of the Vigilantes, and urge them to hunt you down to death!"

With that threat, she sped away toward the now near ranch.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FIRE FIENDS AT WORK.

THAT day passed quietly enough at Grenada. Always after the storm comes a calm; an aphorism true of human as well as physical nature.

The angry mob soon wore its fierce passions out, and when those composing it saw that the armed guard surrounding the calaboose did not flinch, they soon dispersed.

During the day, in accordance with his promise, Dan Brown of Denver paid the two prisoners another visit.

To all appearance confinement and the threatening yell of the bloodthirsty mob had greatly shaken their courage, and before the detective left the jail he had secured a partial confession from the lips of Billy Cooper, and a reluctant promise of more information as soon as he could furnish proof of his pledge that they should escape with their lives in return for selling their comrades.

As expected, the company which had set out in chase of the audacious road-agents, returned without having accomplished anything of importance.

Warned by the bold attempt at rescue of the last night, Enoch Dodge, as the shades of evening settled once more over the busy little town, stationed half a dozen trusty men around the calaboose, with orders to halt any and all persons who attempted a close approach, and to fire upon such as did not immediately obey the challenge.

Thus matters stood in Grenada, that night, when the attention of the men guarding the calaboose was attracted by a rapidly increased glow against the cloudy heavens beyond.

"A fire, or I'm a nigger!" uttered one, his face showing pale in the increasing glow of ruddy light. "The Lord help Grenada this night if it once gets fairly started!"

Wild and penetrating rung out the voice of his comrade.

"Fire—fire! the whole town is burning up!"

Such an alarm in one of our Western towns is very different from the same in great cities. There are no steam fire engines, no admirably drilled force of flame-fighters, no chief whom long experience has taught exactly what orders to give, or dauntless hands to execute what his cool head plans.

Built mostly of frame, hastily put together, now dry and inflammable, there was nothing in the buildings to check or offer the slightest resistance to the leaping flames. A few wells, scattered here and there, formed the only water supply, and were these worked to their utmost capacity, they could scarcely suffice for extinguishing a single fire—while now, from the lurid heavens, it was clear that this was no ordinary conflagration.

The glow came from the further end of the town, composed for the most part of private dwellings, and the quarter where three of the half-dozen guards lived with their families.

"Tell the boss how it was, Jim," hoarsely uttered the man who had sent forth the thrilling alarm. "I never deserted my duty afore, but over yonder lives my fam'ly—my wife an' little ones—an' the baby sick too! I've got to go, Jim!"

He darted away on the wings of fear, not for himself but for those dearer far than his own life. And close at his heels ran two of his mates, those whose humble homes also lay in the quarter from whence came that terrible blood-red glare.

"Go and lend a helpin' hand, boys," cried the policeman named Jim. "I kin keep the door, an' every hand is needed over yender, or I miss my gness!"

No more words were needed. Little suspecting all that yonder flames were intended to cover, the two policemen dropped their rifles and rushed with all speed toward the doomed quarter of the town.

Enoch Dodge was among the first to reach the scene of the conflagration, and at the first glance he saw that it could only have been the work of incendiaries. Half a dozen or more frail frame buildings had been discovered in flames at the same moment, each situated at the edge of a clump of similar houses, and all on the windward side. The breeze was brisk and momentarily growing stronger. Already the flames had communicated to buildings adjoining those set afire. Destruction menaced Grenada. Unless the fire could be checked, the morning would dawn upon a desolate heap of ruins where now stood the lively city of the foot-hills.

Loud and clear his voice arose, soaring high above the wild and constantly increasing tumult. He summoned them one and all. Never before was his popularity and personal influence more strongly displayed. Even those whose worldly all was even then being licked up by the lurid flames, paused in the mad fight to hearken unto his words.

They were brief and to the point. Unless the flames were speedily checked, all must suffer—the entire town would be destroyed—every soul in Grenada would be turned out into the world without a home.

This much he said, and the roaring, crackling, far-leaping flames terribly seconded his words and helped to carry conviction to the hearts of all within hearing.

Then he proposed an alternative; one scarcely less terrible to contemplate. But those to whom he spoke, had ere this seen the dark side of life, and knew that some must be sacrificed to save the majority.

"We must cut off the fire, an' that's only one way it kin be done," came his words, clear and forcible. "We must use powder—blow up a few houses—tear away the ruins—starve the flames out! A few must suffer, but it shall be made up to them. I'll start a subscription list myself."

There was no need of further speech. The mass of excited men at once grasped the idea, only too glad to seize upon the slightest chance of saving the town, and sprung to their work of demolition in order to save.

Some few offered resistance among those who were to lose their all, but hasty argument convinced the most, while the others were restrained by force from hindering the only thing that could save the town.

The various magazines where mining stores were kept were opened and powder carried by hundreds of eager arms to the doomed buildings. The mines were hastily formed and trains laid. Then, one after another, deep, sullen booms announced another phase of that terrible night.

High toward the lurid heavens flew the shattered fragments, and almost before the missiles descended, the surging crowd rushed back to extinguish the sparks and bear away the debris.

Men work like heroes, and even the women and children lent their aid. The wind blew the heat toward them. The flames shot out their devouring tongues like fiery serpents, singeing and scorching whatever they touched, striving in vain to beat back the energetic mass of humanity who were destroying in order to save.

While in the hottest of this wild turmoil, Enoch Dodge ran against and recognized one of the men whom he had placed on guard at the jail over the outlaw prisoners, and that recognition showed him the truth.

He knew that all this had been the work of incendiary hands, but the emergency was too critical for him to give the reason a second thought, until now. As by instinct he recognized it now, and knew as well as though he had overheard their plans that the band of Captain Moonshine hoped to rescue their imprisoned fellows under cover of the confusion which would naturally follow the discovery of such an extensive fire.

He saw that the work of demolition, so well begun, was in a fair way to be completed successfully, and knowing that he could be spared, he bade the policemen gather a dozen good men and hasten to the calaboose.

Then, at top speed, he raced through the deserted street which led to the prison, mechanically assuring himself that the revolvers were still safe in his belt, which he had buckled around him at the first alarm of fire.

But great as was his speed, he was too late. By the red glare that was reflected from the

thunder-clouds above and rendered the streets almost as light as day, he saw the door of the calaboose idly swinging in the wind—saw that the nest had again been rifled!

After sending the last men away to aid in fighting the flames, the sole remaining guard, James Hardress, stood before the door of the jail, watching the rapidly increasing glow with that peculiar interest which one feels in the presence of a fire, especially if the flames are devouring the property of those one knows well.

Hardress was a single man, and boarded at the hotel kept by his superior officer, hence he had no personal anxieties to draw him from his post. Yet, and since he had no means of knowing but that the fire was occasioned by some ordinary accident, he paid more attention to it than to his surroundings. Never once did the truth flash across his mind.

It will be remembered that on the past night, the outlaw prisoners had a visitor on the outside, and that Billy Cooper bade his secret friend carry the news to Captain Moonshine. This was done, and then a bold plan arranged by which law and justice might be defeated.

Favored by the rising winds and gathering clouds, a force detailed for that duty, succeeded in setting fire to a number of buildings, as seen, then hastened to rejoin their comrades, eager to take advantage of the excitement and confusion which would speedily arise.

Their success was far beyond their wildest hopes, for their spy returned with word that only one man was left on duty as guard over the prisoners whom they had sworn to release from durance.

Rapidly yet silently they advanced, keeping the building between them and the unsuspecting guard, looking like some weird phantoms of the night in their hoods and long cloaks of somber black.

By a low, guarded hiss, the leader bade his men pause, then tiptoed around the corner of the building.

James Hardress, all unsuspecting of his impending doom, heard nothing, saw nothing but the roar and glow of the conflagration beyond. Then—a panther-like leap, a sure grasp of the throat—one swift, downward stroke of a long-bladed knife—and the outlaw leader held in his arms the quivering form of a murdered man.

His fellows now came forward, and one of their number, with a skeleton key, quickly opened the iron-bound door of the calaboose. The prisoners were awake and on the alert. Though no word had come to them since the message was sent to Captain Moonshine, they had confidence that the terrible oath that bound them, in common with their brother criminals, would not be broken. For this reason they had temporized with the Denver detective, feeding him with false hopes, playing for time, believing that this was all that was needed to insure their rescue.

They heard the alarm of fire, and saw the ruddy glow deepen and grow broader. They believed it was the work of their comrades in crime, and though they were overjoyed when the door was swung open, they were not surprised.

A few minutes sufficed to release them from their bonds, and furnish them with weapons and the disguises usually worn by the gang. Then the party emerged and struck out for the point where they had left their horses.

But they were not to escape so easily.

It was at this moment that Enoch Dodge came up, and after one glance at the open prison, his eyes fell upon the compact body as it moved rapidly down the street.

The red light was sufficient to show him the peculiar garments worn by the retreating men, and shouting loudly, he immediately opened fire upon them.

Two of the hooded figures fell to the ground, one dead, a bullet through the heart, the second with a shattered leg.

Uttering a scream of mingled rage and defiance, the crippled road-agent supported his weight upon one hand, and leveled a revolver at his destroyer. Sharp came the report, and the marshal felt the wind of the leaden missile as it whizzed past his cheek, but he never faltered.

Shouting with every leap, he pursued the enemy. But then he heard the rapid thud of horses' hoofs coming up the road, and believed that the outlaws were being reinforced.

CHAPTER XIX.

FIRE, BULLET AND CORD.

THE scene was a thrilling one. A single man pursuing a dozen black-shrouded figures, whose pistols responded to the sharp report of his revolver; the still and the writhing forms upon the blood-stained ground; and over all the red light of the raging conflagration.

From ahead came the rapid clatter of iron-shod boots at a gallop; from behind rung out the encouraging cheers of the stout men whom the policemen had rallied, as they rushed to the aid of the marshal, whom the sounds of rapid firing told them was in trouble.

Enoch Dodge believed that these horsemen were friends and allies of the outlaws, and

grown desperate by the prospect of losing his game, he was about closing with them single-handed, when they came to an abrupt halt, seemingly thrown into confusion.

New-born hope filled his heart as he saw the black figures rush hurriedly down a narrow side street. That action told him his fears had been without foundation; that instead of friends, the outlaws recognized fresh enemies in the advancing horsemen.

"Turn to the right an' cut 'em off!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "It's the gang o' Cap'n Moonshine, 'scapin' with jail-birds! Ride 'em down—surround an' capter the p'izen imps o' perdition!"

In answer came back a hoarse, prolonged cheer. And then the iron-shod hoofs clattered still more rapidly, as the horsemen scattered out to intercept the marauders.

The road-agents were led by a cool and determined man. At a glance he took in the full peril of their situation, and he saw that their escape was impossible. By the prompt action of the horsemen, their retreat was now cut off in every direction. To retrace their steps was to run against the citizens, who would be doubly dangerous when they saw those who had endeavored to destroy the town by fire. No quarter would they receive. Lucky those who fell fighting; theirs would be the most merciful doom.

"Follow me!" he snarled, his stern resolution taken. "The jig is up, but we'll go under fighting! They must earn my scalp before they wear it."

A few rods before them stood a lone cabin of logs. The door was open, just as it had been left by the owners as they rushed out to the great fire. At a glance the outlaw leader saw how strong a position this was, and knowing that escape by flight was now out of the question, he led the way into the building, with bulldog courage resolving to sell his life as dearly as possible.

Enoch Dodge saw them enter, and from the rage blinded man he became the cool, far-sighted officer of the law.

Himself halting, he shouted aloud a warning to his as yet unknown allies, bidding them take heed—

The words were lost even to his own ears.

The horsemen formed the party of Vigilantes whom we last saw on the trail of the strangely resurrected Will Wilder, following it by the aid of sure nosed hounds, burning to avenge the assassination of the two herders. But their hopes were doomed to disappointment. For a number of miles the trail was easily followed, then took to the water where it was lost. After a long delay the hounds found the lost spoor, and once more led the avengers on.

Then came evidence that the assassin was on his guard, and knew that they were trailing him with bloodhounds, for the trail once more led into the water. And two hours later, floating round and round in an eddy, they found the horse the avenger had ridden, dead, its throat cut.

Thus vanished the only clew by which the hounds could follow the murderer, yet they scattered and searched the banks for miles on either side. In vain. It was as though the fugitive had sunk to the bottom of the river, or else arisen in the air like a bird.

Wearily, disheartened, the Vigilantes went into camp as the shades of night overtook them. They were too far to return home that evening. And here they were when the first glow of burning Grenada was observed by their sentinel.

The alarm was instantly given. In one minute the horses were unhobbled and equipped for the road. In another, the Vigilantes were speeding toward town, eager to lend their aid to their suffering fellow-men, and arriving just in time to cut off the retreat of the bold road-agents.

The rapid report of firearms told them that mischief was in the air, and then the clear shout of Enoch Dodge still further enlightened them.

They saw the black-robed figures enter the lone cabin, and heard the warning cry of the city marshal, but there was not one among them all but what had met with some loss or injury at the hands of the execrated band of outlaws, and now they charged upon the cabin with loud cheers of vengeance.

Suddenly the little cabin seemed encircled by a belt of fire. The outlaws discharged a volley that emptied more than one saddle—turned more than one stout heart faint and sick under the relentless gripe of the skeleton fingers of grim old death!

Still on the survivors charged with a bravery that deserved a better ending. On until their horses fairly touched the weather-beaten logs, and several of the party leaped to the ground, hurling their brawny shoulders against the stout door of puncheons, while others bent over in the saddle and strove to enter at the small windows out of which they dashed both glass and sash.

But the stout door resisted the assault, and those at the windows were either shot dead or else driven back in confusion by the rapid firing from within.

It was a bold, a glorious charge—but none the less foolish.

Stern old Noah Crabtree realized this, and shouted forth the signal of retreat. Sullenly he was obeyed, the Vigilantes rattling their leaden hail against the cabin as they fell back, leaving horses and comrades lying upon the blood-besprinkled ground, dead or moaning in death-agony.

Enoch Dodge saw all this, and his bronzed face grew white with a deadly rage. Truly the outlaw leader had said that they could only sell their lives dearly. Naught else remained for them now. A thousand times over had they sealed their death-warrants!

The fire was lost sight of by all save those more immediately concerned. It was fortunate that a breach had been made before pistols began speaking, or Grenada might have been reduced to ashes. The excited citizens came rushing to the spot, eager to join in the "circus." Had Enoch Dodge but raised his hand, but uttered one word of command, the mob would have rushed upon and carried the cabin by storm. But that word was not uttered. He knew that the outlaws would die hard, and he was no spendthrift of other people's lives. On the contrary, he strove to keep the crowd back out of danger until some plausible plan could be devised, but only with partial success.

The notorious band under Captain Moonshine had been a festering thorn in the side of the community, and when the mob learned what had occurred, when they knew who were inclosed within that cabin, they pressed nearer with wild yells and fierce execrations. And knowing that they could not render their situation any worse, the cooped-up road-agents poured a destructive volley into the closely-crowded ranks, with that mad thirst for blood which such men feel who are fighting with a halter around their necks.

Several men fell, dead or dying; and more would have shared their fate had not the marshal and his men, seconded by the Vigilantes, formed a line and forced the excited mob back to cover.

At this juncture Dan Brown of Denver came up, his hands and face scorched and blackened, his clothes charred and burnt. He had been delayed by an exploit which was yet to lead to strange events, but now he added his efforts to those of his friend, and when the crowd was driven back, he and Dodge, with Noah Crabtree and Jack Gill, on behalf of the Vigilantes, drew apart from the rest and consulted together.

"Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth!" said Noah Crabtree, sternly, pointing to the dead bodies that cumbered the ground. "They have shed the blood of honest men—by men shall their blood be shed!"

"That is understood," dryly interposed the Rocky Mountain detective, "but the question before the court just now is *how*?"

"They burned my house, and in the flames perished my wife and poor, sick baby," interrupted a policeman—the same who had first left his post of duty at the prison. "Let them see how their own medicine tastes—fire! roast the bloodthirsty hell-hounds alive!"

"Fire—burn them alive in their den!" yelled the excited mob, catching up the cry and repeating it until the distant hills echoed again.

The cooped-up outlaws heard the terrible cry, and silently interchanged glances, sadder yet defiant. They knew that their doom had been spoken, and now they thought only of how they could exact the highest possible price for their lives. Since die they must, it should not be alone.

The detective shrugged his shoulders significantly as his eyes met those of the city marshal.

"They have taken the bit between their teeth, and we can do nothing. If Captain Moonshine is in yonder, he will never shed his light upon the highway again."

The marshal saw that not even his great popularity with the masses would save him from injury should he attempt to balk them now, and he only strove to direct their efforts so that as little blood might be shed as possible.

By his directions a couple of wagons were procured and loaded high with hay, mingled with pine boards and knots in order to make the flame powerful as well as fierce.

Many hands make speedy work, and in half an hour from the time when the maddened policeman uttered his frantic appeal for vengeance, the wagons were loaded and slowly moving toward the doomed cabin under the impulse of twenty stout arms.

Though the fire beyond was beginning to die away for lack of fuel to feed its fury, there was still sufficient light for the outlaws to see and realize the extremity of their danger, and they at once opened fire upon the wagons. But Enoch Dodge had neglected no possible precautions. Several mattresses had been fastened to the back end of each wagon in such a manner that the men who impelled the vehicles were thoroughly protected from shot as they backed their loads toward the building, aiming for the end of the cabin which faced the wind.

A wild, united yell rent the night air as the wagons, side by side, thumped heavily against the fated cabin, a yell that was defiantly echoed back by the outlaws as they sent a volley of

pistol balls into the ranks of their enemies whom the sight had drawn from cover.

"There goes the fire!" muttered Dan Brown, as a bright, curling flame shot out from beneath one of the wagons. "Half an hour at the outside will end it all! Luckily the wind did not blow from the sides where the door is, or our chances of gleaning any information from these inside would be mighty slim!"

"They'll make a rush when the shell grows red-hot. Be ready to close in. If possible we must take at least one of the gang alive. Captain Moonshine may not be among them, and while he is at liberty, our work is not half done. Gather what trusty men you can, old man!"

Enoch Dodge did what he could, but he found that was but little. The crowd was terribly excited and would be nearly as dangerous to cross in the moment of vengeance as a wounded lioness while fighting for its cubs. Still he selected half a dozen men on whom he felt he could thoroughly depend, and held himself in readiness for the supreme moment.

Having fairly started the fire, the adventurers, knowing that the strong wind would accomplish the rest, ran swiftly away from the point of danger, keeping the blazing barrier between themselves and the enemy so well that they all reached cover in safety.

As they turned to view the work their hands had begun, they yelled aloud with a fierce joy as they saw the rotten roof already catching fire as the wind swept the roaring flames over it.

All was silent now within the burning building, but it was the stillness that precedes the hurricane, and the storm would be all the more furious when it should finally break forth. All present realized this, and with bated breath and ready weapons they watched and waited for the crisis.

This could not be long delayed. The prevailing drouth had rendered the pine logs ripe for the fire, and the flames were rapidly doing their work.

Suddenly the outburst came. The door was flung open and the road-agents leaped forth, separating as though each man was resolved to depend wholly upon himself. But before they could take more than a second leap the yelling mob broke cover and closed in around them, firing as rapidly as they could revolve the cylinder of their pistols.

The doomed road-agents melted away before that fearful fusillade like snowflakes before the breath of a glowing furnace. A few scattering shots were all they had time to fire, and though Dan Brown of Denver, with Enoch Dodge and the posse the marshal had selected, dashed forward at top speed the moment the enemy broke cover, they were too late. Before they reached fifty yards the last one of the outlaws reeled and fell to the ground, his revolver sending a bullet high up among the storm-clouds as though in dying defiance.

"Pitch 'em into the fire!" screamed the nearly crazed policeman who had lost his dear ones in the fire those wretches had kindled. "Give 'em a foretaste of—"

With a swift, dexterous stroke, the marshal felled him to the ground, senseless, then ranged his men around the motionless, bleeding form, crying aloud:

"They're dead—that's enough! I'll blow the brains out o' the first critter as lays a finger on 'em! Vigilantes—you an' all honest men form a line around us. Keep back the mob until we kin see what our game looks like."

Eager as a bloodhound on the scent, Dan Brown was already stripping the black cowls from the heads of the fallen men, grating his white teeth angrily at each failure to find the object of his search—Captain Moonshine.

He reached the man who had fallen last, and tore away the sable covering, to find, not the longed-for person, but the bloated and bristly face of the bumster, Billy Cooper.

The bloodshot eyes opened and the snaggy teeth grated fiercely as the wretch recognized the face bending over him.

"It's your turn now, you two-legged bloodhound!" he gasped, his voice husky and feeble in all save bitter hatred. "But the time'll come—there's those free and afoot that will manage to throw you off the trail forever! Curse you! I could die happy if I only had my teeth in your throat!"

"Close around and keep back the mob," cried Brown, as the crowd surged forward on learning that one of the road-agents still lived. "Come, old fellow, you are not bad hurt. Confess all as you promised, and I will save your life."

A fierce, husky laugh came from the cracked lips.

"Bah! I spit in your face! I don't ask mercy—I don't want to live. I am riddled with bullets. Even if I could recover, it would be only as a helpless cripple. But before I die—go ahead, and tell the devil I'm coming!"

As he uttered these words, Cooper raised a pistol and thrust it almost against the breast of the detective. Only a supernatural quickness saved the man from instant death. A swift leap aside evaded the bullet, which crashed through the brain of the nearest Vigilante.

A hoarse united yell of vengeance arose. The comrades of the murdered Vigilante hurled Brown and Dodge aside and grasped the dying wretch, who feebly cursed and blasphemed as, with him in their midst, threatening the police with their revolvers, they hastened to the foot of the nearest tree.

A lariat was quickly flung over a horizontal limb, and the noose adjusted around the neck of the road-agent.

Then Noah Crabtree gave the signal, and a dozen stout arms "walked away" with the rope, the tightening noose cutting short a horrible flood of blasphemy and reviling.

CHAPTER XX.

STARTLING DISCLOSURES.

THERE was an evil light in the eye of Frank Blackwood as he sat in his saddle, gazing after the rapidly receding form of the woman, lawfully his wife, yet who had so proudly defied the worst he could bring up against her. He sat motionless until she disappeared from view around a small grove of trees that stood near the low ranch of Jack Gill, then he wrenched his horse's head around, a low, peculiar laugh parting his lips.

"By the wig of Absalom! she looked like a tragedy queen as she hurried that scornful defiance in my teeth! Had she been always the same, I could hardly have deserted her, even for the fortune of fair Rachel. A poor, pale, weeping, eternally damp ghost of a woman—and now a steel-nerved little fury! Look out, my lady! One more such interview as that, and Jack Gill may be called upon to fight for his young bride!"

Laughing again at the visions which this conceit called up before his mind's eye, the young lawyer rode slowly back to the Crabtree place, his brow growing darker and more bent as he pondered over the many evils which this unexpected meeting might cause.

He was playing a bold game for high stakes. His clear brain and cold heart had given him the better thus far, but as he glanced at the future, he could see the many threads of his cunningly woven net growing more and more entangled.

First had come the appearance of Dan Brown of Denver upon the scene. Then the mysterious disappearance of the marriage certificate to which the name of Beverley Brownell was appended as the groom—the husband of Rachel Dowbridge. And now, just as he was playing his cards with two different methods of winning the game in view, there must arise this ghost from a black and unholy past which he had deemed forever buried from human ken—his wife, now calling herself Agnes Gill, wife of the lieutenant of Vigilantes!

With a fierce, grating curse, Frank Blackwood plunged his spurs rowel deep into the flanks of his horse. The spirited animal bounded forward with a snort of pain, nor slackened its breakneck pace until the Crabtree ranch was reached.

Dismounting and tossing the reins to David, Frank strode away to meet his worthy parent, who was beckoning to him from beyond one of the corrals, strong anxiety depicted upon his culture-like countenance.

The sight of his evident perplexity seemed to act as a sedative to the young man's nerves, and he instantly became his usual cool, insolent self. They were alone upon the level plain. No one could approach them unseen or unheard. There was no necessity for his wearing the mask just now, and his real character was openly disclosed.

"What is this strange story I hear?" demanded the elder lawyer, with a nervous glance around them. "Surely you have not been quarreling with your friend, Mr. — ah, Captain Moonshine?"

"What is friendship when a fair lady is in peril?" uttered Frank, with a mocking laugh. "Did you not urge upon me the wisdom of putting my best foot foremost with Rachel? And how could I better recommend myself to her good graces than by rushing to her rescue when her liberty, if not honor itself was at stake?"

"But David and Rachel both say that you shot to kill—that Captain Moonshine had received his death wound when carried away upon the neck of his horse."

"Very likely. The odds were two to one, and I did not know how many more might be hidden among the bushes or around the turn in the road. After all, I took them by surprise and showed myself a hero in the eyes of the fair damsel at but little danger to myself."

The father stared at his son in hopeless perplexity. The enigma was beyond his solving. He said, nervously:

"If you killed him, you have made the whole land your deadly enemies, and they will know no rest until they hunt you to the grave or—to the gallows! If not—if he is only wounded—then the case is even worse. From a firm friend he will become a terrible enemy. He will expose all we have done! Curse it! Girl! you have miserably botched the whole business, and I mean to take the stage and be on my road home to-morrow, before the storm can burst!"

Long and loudly laughed the son. More and more angry waxed the father, until

foaming at the mouth and shaking his gold-headed cane vigorously, he seemed on the point of inflicting corporal chastisement on the railer.

Frank Blackwood checked his inerrant, barely in time to avert a caning, and suddenly growing serious, his strong hand closed upon the arm of the irate old man with a powerful pressure that caused the cane to drop from his quivering fingers.

"Enough of nonsense. It was in me, and had to out or I should have burst. Calm yourself. I am not mad. I am no fool, though I have been playing the first part in a roaring farce. Be content. Captain Moonshine is as sound in mind, limb and body as I am at this moment."

Ezra Blackwood stared in open-eyed amazement. In the city and among the courts he was as acute and far-seeing as the best of his brother legal rats, but out here in these lawless wilds, he was like a landsman in a hurricane on the ocean.

Frank saw this, but he was not annoyed. After the heavy blow that had been dealt him by the appearance of the wife whom he had believed lost forever, if not actually dead, he felt just in the humor for open confession. There was a peculiar zest in narrating how his cunningly-laid plans had been rendered in vain by a ghost of the past.

"Listen—and look less like an idiot, or a freshly-resurrected corpse, if you can contrive it just as well as not," he said, with cold insolence; then continued, with a careless composure: "You remember the appeal you made to my heart, before we left Grenada? Why could I not put on my best bib and tucker, and make up to the fair Rachel as a suitor? Well, I thought the matter over, and concluded that I might do worse. True, I had one wife living somewhere, but it was not likely that she would ever turn up to cause me trouble."

"The fair Rachel is a little inclined to be romantic; indeed, you gave me that clew yourself. With one of her temperament the shortest way to the heart is through hero-worship. Knowing this, I had little difficulty in laying my plans, still less in putting them into execution."

"In order to do so, I joined the Vigilantes—what a howling and gnashing of teeth there would have been could they have even suspected all we know!"

"As I said, I joined them in their ride, until at a point not far from where I had a rendezvous arranged; then was conveniently overpowered by the heat of the sun. David knew what to expect—"

"Then he is—" hesitated Ezra Blackwood.

"Exactly. He is one of the best spies of the band. It is through him that Captain Moonshine receives the information that enables him to constantly foil the most subtle and dangerous plans which are formed by the Vigilantes."

"Together we hastened to the rendezvous, and while there I set my newly-formed plan in motion. When all was understood, David and I came here, I as an invalid."

"You know how I played my part. You know, too, that David persuaded Rachel out to ride with him, and that I, not long afterward, having in a measure recovered from my illness, also set forth on horseback."

"Lucky chance for by it I was enabled to display my wonderful heroism by rescuing the damsel in distress—"

"You don't mean that—that it was all a fraud?" ejaculated the old lawyer, his fishy eyes protruding.

"So!" laughed his son, mockingly. "You begin to see through the railstone at last? Yes, I do mean it! That rendezvous was kept with Captain Moonshine and a trusty fellow known as Grizzly. I bade them watch their chance and spring the trap at the right moment, when I would put in an appearance and wrest the choice morsel from them."

"But the boy—David?"

"He acted as I knew he would, perfectly. There was no charge in his pistol, which he snapped against Grizzly's breast. The struggle which ensued between them was a mock one. Grizzly pretended to throttle the lad, but was careful not to injure him."

"Captain Moonshine, following my instructions, tried to learn from Rachel where that document was, but in vain. Either she does not know of its present whereabouts or else she can lie to perfection!"

"While the captain was thus engaged, Grizzly slipped into the bushes and gave me the signal. I clapped spurs to my horse, and dashed upon the tragic scene in a blaze of glory. My first shot crippled Grizzly—in a born—while the second sent Captain Moonshine reeling away on his horse with his death-wound—equally imaginary. Of course neither of them were touched. They are too good tools for me to misuse them in any way."

"Be sure I made the most of my opportunity, and dropped sweet vows into the ears of the fair damsel whom I had rescued from frightful peril by bravely risking my life. I don't say that she fully reciprocated, but I honestly believe that I made an impression on her heart that would ere long enable me to call myself its master. So far all had gone well. But then, when I was talking

full glow of that blissful belief, I came face to face with my wife!"

Ezra Blackwood started, but said nothing. His brain was beginning to buzz and whirl crazily before all these startling revelations and he could only stare vacantly into the now cold and stern-set countenance of his son.

"My wife, now known in these parts as Mrs. Agnes Gill. She was one of the passengers in the coach with you. If Captain Moonshine had only known the truth! But here she is, and she swears that if I do not abandon my foul schemes—as she terms them—against Miss Trowbridge, she will betray me and my past to the Vigilantes, of whom her present husband—so called—is a leader."

"It is bigamy," muttered the old lawyer, still dazed.

"Fear of that counter-accusation would not hinder her, if ever I give her cause. The devil was in her eyes as big as a wood-chuck when she told me so. No, that plan must be abandoned. But none the less the fortune must come into our hands. We have gone too far to back out now. The first plan must be carried out to the bitter end."

"If that certificate cannot be found, then Captain Moonshine must abduct her once more. She must be talked or frightened into having the ceremony performed over again, for, no matter what trouble it causes us to do so, there must be no grounds for doubting the legality of the marriage."

"She will never fall into the same snare again," said the old man, more like his usual self now that legal topics were introduced. "She will die before consenting—"

"There is a way to make her glad to do so," interrupted Frank, with a short, significant laugh. "If all other means fail, then we will try that. Afterward—when the right to her fortune is securely invested in us—then, I am sadly afraid that the fair Rachel will pine away—and die!"

Whatever response Ezra Blackwood may have made to this diabolical speech, will never be known, for David, accompanied by a horseman, at that moment was seen hurriedly approaching them.

Frank Blackwood appeared to recognize the man, and drew him to one side out of ear-shot, then received his communication. His face grew pale and stern-set, while his eyes filled with an ugly, dangerous light that boded ill to some one.

The horseman turned and trotted away.

"Come," said the young lawyer, in a low, strained voice. "I have received an important call. A very dear friend of mine has gotten himself into a serious scrape, and has begged me to come and defend him. There is no time to lose. You two must make my excuses to the ladies. Tell them why I could not stop to make my adieux. You, father, remain here until I come back, or you hear from me."

Hastening to the corrals, Blackwood caught up his horse, saddled and bridled it, then mounted and sped away toward Grenada like one bound on a mission of life or death.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CURIOUS PROPOSITION.

ON the morning following the fire and the fight with the road-agents, Dan Brown of Denver was seated at a side table in the dining-room of the Golden Eagle, eating his breakfast with an appetite by no means lessened by the exciting scenes he had so recently passed through. Nor was he altogether dissatisfied with the work that had been done. True, the head rascal was still at large, but his band had suffered great losses. At least one-half of those composing "the family" had been slain outright. At that rate, another week would see the end!

At this point the detective's meditations were broken in upon by the curious behavior of one of the waiters, a sallow son of Africa, who stared almost bursting with some important secret. Fortunately the room was nearly empty, else the exaggerated mystery observed by the fellow would assuredly have defeated itself, before he placed a folded napkin before Brown, from the inside of which peeped the corner of a small pink envelope.

Wholly disregarding the darky's energetic gestures which seemed to declare the strict necessity of secrecy, Brown tossed him a silver quarter, withdrew the dainty note from the napkin, opened the envelope and read the contents at a glance.

The closest observer could not have detected the slightest change in the countenance of the detective while thus engaged, yet he might well have exhibited surprise.

The handwriting was feminine; so too the perfumed and delicately scented paper. There was neither address nor signature attached, yet the detective did not doubt that the message was intended for him.

The contents of the note read as follows:

"One whom you have served, and who wishes you well, is in possession of facts of the greatest importance to the end you have in view. It is a matter of life and death, and I am writing you at once."

Dan Brown in the middle of the night and stowed it away in his pocket book, then quietly resumed his meal. But, though not a trace of such feeling was allowed to show itself upon his countenance, he felt an inward exultation that is not easily described.

It might all be a mistake. The message may have been intended for another, wrongly delivered through the blundering of a stupid servant. Yet he did not believe this. He felt confident that the enigmatical words were addressed to himself, and that they bore reference to his campaign against the outlawed band of Captain Moonshine.

A vague suspicion that there might be some treachery concealed beneath that invitation to an interview did occur to the detective, only to be quickly banished. If such was intended, it would be any place rather than under the roof of the city marshal's hotel.

Perfectly familiar with the interior arrangements of the building, Dan Brown of Denver ran lightly up the stairs and pausing before the door of Room 11, knocked gently upon the panel. Almost immediately a clear, musical voice bade him enter, and with apparent carelessness, but in reality with every sense upon the alert and on guard against any treachery, the detective opened the door and entered the room.

His hidden precautions proved needless, however.

There was but one occupant of the room, besides himself; a sickly, yet neatly-dressed woman who arose at his entrance and came forward with both hands extended, her cheeks flushed, her eyes aglow.

"You left me so suddenly last night, that I had not time to thank you. I do so now, as far as poor words can—only for your heroism, I must have lost my life!" she murmured, her bright eyes dimming.

"You are sure there is no mistake? that I am not usurping the thanks due to some more fortunate man?" said Brown, smiling, yet plainly at a loss how to understand the effusion with which he was greeted.

"You have forgotten me—or rather you only saw me as a woman in distress—but I—though I were to live a thousand years, I could never forget! To me you were more than a man, then, when I had given over all hopes of living. To me you were a demi-god—my savior!"

She folded his hand in both of her soft palms, and pressed her warm lips to it again and again, before he could check her. Then she gently led him to the sofa, seating herself beside him, when he sat, lightly.

"Tell me when and where I had the honor of serving you. Ungallant as the words may sound, for the life of me I cannot imagine where we ever met before this morning."

"Yet it was only last night that you saved my life at the risk of your own! Ah! you remember now!" she added, with a short, hard laugh, as the detective involuntarily withdrew his arm from around her waist.

He did remember. He was doing yeoman's service at the fire kindled by the road-agents to cover their attempted rescue, and at one of the windows of a two-story frame building he saw a woman, screaming with terror and crying for help. The lower part of the building was all in a blaze, but snatching up a coil of rope from a pile of goods near by, which had been hurriedly removed from a small grocery store, he bowed his head and dashed into the fiery mass, reaching the second story in safety, though his face, hands and clothes were scorched and burnt, while he was nearly strangled with the heavy, noxious smoke and gases.

He lowered the fainting woman in safety to the ground, then descended himself, barely in time. In less than two minutes after, the floor fell in, and the entire building was a mass of fire.

There was too much work on hand for him to waste any time, and only pausing to see that the woman was being cared for by those of her own sex, he plunged once more into the thick of the fight with the flames.

He remembered now, what he had been told after the fight with the road-agents, that this building had been assigned to a woman of questionable fame and this was she—the not too pure Clara Castle.

The revelation was so totally unexpected that he could not help recoiling, very slightly, it is true, but quite enough to arouse the morbid feeling of the young woman. However, it was not without one good result. It altered the tone of a scene that was growing decidedly romantic.

For once in his life the detective was taken aback, and began a confused apology, remembering that his hopes depended on his keeping the damsel in good humor, but with an impatient wave of the hand, she checked him.

"Don't treat me like a spoiled child. I have thanked you for saving my life. But I had another motive in asking you to come here. You guess it?"

"I have an idea, but it may be a wrong one," the detective replied, quietly. "Perhaps you had better explain. There can be no possibility of our meeting."

"Cautious and noncommittal, like all of your profession; but I do not object to that. You are the man known as Dan Brown of Denver, otherwise the Rocky Mountain detective?"

"I have been called by both names, yes."

"Good! You have come out here to do what all others have failed in: to capture Captain Moonshine and destroy his band of outlaws and robbers. You have managed to dispose of nearly one half of the gang, but you are as far from the most important part of your plans as at first. Alone and unaided by one who is in the secret, you will never succeed, but will disappear as suddenly and mysteriously as have other detectives who sought to earn the price set on the head of Captain Moonshine."

"I am ready to run that risk," was the cool response. "When I find a criminal too cunning for me to outwit and circumvent, then I have outgrown my usefulness, and am willing to make way for better men."

"I believe you mean what you say, even if it does sound remarkably like boasting," returned Clara, with a faint smile. "Yesterday, no person would have rejoiced more heartily in your utter defeat than I: to-day, I am ready to deliver Captain Moonshine, his entire band and all their secrets, provided—"

"Well?" demanded Dan Brown, as the woman paused.

"On certain conditions, of course," she added, regaining her wonted composure with an evident effort. "I can do so. Never mind how I gained the knowledge. Agree to my conditions, and by this time to-morrow you can place on record the proudest victory of your professional career!"

"A wise man never pledges himself blindly," observed Brown, apparently wholly unmoved. "Make known your conditions, and if they are such as I can grant, be sure I'll do it."

"A few short words—a fee to the minister—no more."

The detective stared at the speaker in bewilderment, but as he did so, he read the truth in her pleading eyes, her flushed cheek, her trembling hands.

"Wait—do not speak yet," she cried, quickly. "Take time to think, and while doing so, I will explain. And before I go further, I solemnly swear to you on the memory of my sainted mother, that all I say is gospel truth!"

There was painful silence for a few moments, then Clara Castle spoke in a low, rapid voice:

"I don't say that I have led a blameless life, for that would be a lie. I have made money by the sins of others. All the world knows that; but of that you have heard the worst. No man can truthfully say that my soul is not as pure as when I lay an infant upon my dead mother's breast. You can have the rest of this day in which to make full inquiry about me and my conduct. If you find any one who can prove me dishonored, I solemnly swear to furnish you with all the information you desire without price or condition."

"How I came to occupy my present position in life, does not matter now. That story I will only tell to my husband—if I ever have one. And this brings me back to my condition. Marry me. I will make you a true and faithful wife. I loved you then, in that horrible moment when I had abandoned all hope of living—when I saw you rush to my aid, burned, on fire—a hero, almost a god!"

She ceased abruptly and bowed her face upon her hands. The detective was strangely moved. Only for a pure, lovely vision which arose in that critical moment before his eyes, he might have said or done something for which he would have been sorry as soon as he had time for sober reflection. As it was, his voice was unsteady as he at length made reply:

"I do believe what you say, but, unfortunately for us both, perhaps, I am already wedded—to my profession!"

"And in that I can aid you!" eagerly cried Clara, raising her head, her eyes aglow. "I ask no better life."

Dan Brown slowly shook his head. She saw the motion and read it aright. She gazed steadily into his eyes, upon his pale, resolute features, and knew that the prize on which she had set her wayward heart, was not to be gained by such as she.

Still she was not content to accept defeat. She recapitulated all she could do. She would place Captain Moonshine in his power. She could deliver up to him the entire band, with all their plunder and their secrets. She could make a wife with whom he could trust all his ambitious schemes, and one who could aid him to carry them on to success.

The detective listened to her courteously enough, but even she could see that her passionate appeal had no effect upon his resolution. When she ended, he replied:

"If I could in honor, I would do as you wish, but there is another who fully occupies my heart. I can feel love only for her, and to accept your offer, while such is the case, would be wronging you—"

"I am ready—eager to run the risk!" she interrupted.

"But I am not," he added, rising to cut the interview short. "When you have time to re-

flect, you will see it the same as I do, and thank me then."

"If not mine, then no one's!" she cried, now a beautiful fury. "If you go out from this room unpledged to me, you go to your death!"

"Of two evils, I always choose the least!" laughed the detective, bowing, then leaving the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DEATH-TRAIL.

"THAT is your man—mark him closely that there may be no mistake. Watch your chance, and when you strike, strike sure and swift. There must be no bungling work this time."

Low and hissing these words were spoken by Frank Blackwood, on the night succeeding that on which Grenada had so narrowly escaped being blotted out of existence.

"If you have made no mistake, we won't," responded his companion in the same guarded whisper, gazing keenly upon the clear-cut, handsome features of the man indicated. "Looks more like a sucking dandy fresh from college than a tough old detective!"

"Yet, that is Dan Brown of Denver—a bloodhound if ever there was one in human shape! Remember, it is either he or us. So long as he lives, the neck of every one belonging to the family is in danger. Ready, now!"

During this hurried conversation, the principal object of it was standing on the top step of the Golden Eagle, talking earnestly with the city marshal, Enoch Dodge. He had made some change in his clothes, but none who had ever seen him before could mistake his features, now wholly undisguised. As Frank Blackwood cut his speech short and drew back into the dense shadows, the detective parted from Enoch Dodge and lightly descended the steps.

"After him, Wilder—take him prisoner if you can, and learn about the paper. If not, then kill him!" muttered the young lawyer, as the detective turned toward the burnt district.

The trailer nodded, his hard-set, handsome face momentarily revealed by the red glow of the hotel lamp. There was no mercy in either face or eyes. Since that terrible night when the Vigilantes under Noah Crabtree fitted the noose around the lover's throat and swung him, as they believed, into eternity, this man had known only one passion—that of revenge, deep and remorseless.

With the silent tread of an Indian warrior stealing upon a deadly foe, the avenger dogged the detective, himself followed at a short distance by three other men who held themselves in readiness to rush to his assistance at a moment's warning.

Fortune seemed to be favoring the outlaws. The detective passed on to where the blackened ruins showed weirdly in the moonlight, never once glancing behind him, all unsuspecting of the terrible doom that overhung his head.

The ruins were deserted. Wilder cast a keen, comprehensive glance around him, and saw that the moment for decisive action had arrived.

He unloosed the lasso which hung coiled at his belt, and swinging the snaky coils around his head, glided silently forward until within hurling distance. Swift and sure the rope shot forward and descended over the head of the detective. A cry of surprise broke from his lips, but was cut short as Wilder leaped backward, pulling fiercely upon the lasso. With a heavy shock, the captive fell to the ground, lying still and motionless as though slain outright.

Swiftly the three men darted toward the fallen man, while Wilder kept the rope taut, ready to check any attempt on the part of his victim to arise. This precaution proved needless, however. In falling the detective had struck his head heavily against a fragment of quartz, and was now insensible.

Not a word passed between the road-agents. Their course had been arranged beforehand, and was promptly followed.

A serviceable gag was fastened in place. The detective was disarmed and his hands bound behind his back. Then the three men raised him from the ground and rapidly bore him away, Wilder following and acting as look-out.

He had a plausible account ready in case they should be met and questioned by any curious party, but no such meeting took place. From first to last everything was favorable to the complete success of their nefarious plans.

When fairly clear of the town, the detective was lowered to the ground, and leaving Wilder on guard, the three outlaws hastened away for their horses.

The death of Dan Brown had been decided upon, but no outsider must ever know the manner of his taking off. His fate must remain a mystery forever.

Scarcely had the three men disappeared, when consciousness returned to the detective. With a faint groan he opened his eyes and strove to arise—only to hear a low, mocking laugh as he realized that he was helpless.

"Cool and easy, my dear fellow," mocked Wilder, bending over his bound victim. "We have called the turn on you at last. You have played the bloodhound long enough, and now

are fairly started on *your death-trail!* The world has seen the last of the wonderful detective, Dan Brown of Denver!"

The prisoner struggled as though he would speak, but Wilder, with an insulting laugh, placed one foot upon his breast and pressed him rudely back. Suddenly he crouched down, one hand upon the detective's throat, the other holding a cocked revolver against his temple.

Two men, evidently more than half drunk, were drawing near, now cursing, now singing in maudlin tones. Had they been sober, they must almost certainly have discovered the outlaw and his prisoner. As it was, Wilder could not breathe freely until they passed on and were swallowed up by the darkness.

A few minutes later the three outlaws returned with five horses. The prisoner was lifted into the saddle, his feet being bound together beneath the horse's belly. The lasso was tightened around his body and arms, while Wilder retained possession of the other end.

Mounting, the road-agents followed the main trail for a mile or more away from town, then struck off to the right, plunging deep into the rocky recesses. In silence they rode along like grim phantoms of the night, now in the clear moonlight, now in dense obscurity as one of the many clouds flitted across the moon's broad disk.

Thus for more than two hours, the end of that time finding them far away from Grenada, deep in the heart of the mountains where the foot of white man rarely trod before.

"As good here as elsewhere," uttered Wilder, with a hard, metallic laugh, as he swung himself from the saddle and flung the reins to one of his followers. "Come, Mr. Dan Brown of Denver, your death-trail ends here."

With a knife he cut the bond that held the feet of his victim, then rudely pulled him from the saddle while his comrades in crime stood around in readiness to lend their aid in case it should be needed. It was plain that they did not hold the prowess of the detective lightly.

The prisoner made no struggle, as a less cool and brave man might. He saw that to do so would be worse than useless. The cruel lasso would check him in an instant if he attempted flight, and fight was out of the question so long as his arms remained bound.

Still, he cast a keen, comprehensive glance around him. He saw that they were in a peculiarly wild and lonesome spot, far from the haunts of man. Before them lay a narrow but deep abyss, from the damp and gloomy depths of which came the faint gurgle of running water.

"That is your grave, my dear fellow," assured Wilder, with a cold, heartless laugh, observing the direction of his glance. "You will be the first man that ever explored the mysteries of Devil's Gulch, and I very much fear that you will never report the results of your investigation."

While speaking, he cut the thongs that held the gag in place, thus leaving the detective at liberty to speak.

"In the first place," he said, taking prompt advantage of the opportunity, "you are barking up the wrong tree if you imagine me to be Dan Brown of Denver—"

"Bah! do you take us for fools, and blind into the bargain?" rudely interposed Wilder. "Dan Brown or Dan the devil, you are the chicken we're after. Twice you gave us the slip, but the third time proves the charm, in this case. You are no better than a dead man now—unless you open your mouth and tell me where you have hidden the certificate of the captain's marriage."

"I don't know what you mean," was the quiet response. "I know neither you, the captain nor the certificate you speak of. I repeat, I am not the gentleman known to you as Dan Brown of Denver. I admit that we strongly resemble each other—"

"So powerfully that whenever you have the toothache, he feels like running after the dentist," laughed Wilder.

"Believe it or not, I am speaking the simple truth. My name is Henry Thorold. I reside in St. Louis when I am at home. I came out here on private business, wholly disconnected with you if, as I believe, you are members of the band of road-agents under command of the man they call Captain Moonshine. Mr. Dodge can prove the truth of my words—"

"No doubt you would like to have us take you there for confirmation. We mean to interview the marshal who has been showing himself entirely too fresh of late, but his testimony will not come in time to benefit you, in the flesh. However, if we find out we are in error, I promise you to return and drop a tear over your untimely grave."

The ruffians laughed heartily at this grim speech, and the detective felt a cold thrill creeping over him which, brave as he undeniably was, he could not entirely subdue. For the first time in his life, even as that had been, he found himself face to face with death, and not the slightest ray of hope visible.

"I swear that I am speaking the truth. My name is not Dan Brown. I am not the enemy you seek. I have never wrought you ill, nor

have I ever raised my hand against the band you represent."

"Search the critter," suggested one of the outlaws. "Mebbe he has the dookymment hid about his karkidge."

Wilder promptly acted upon the suggestion, which resulted in the production of a large pocket-book, well filled with bank notes, and also containing an open envelope, directed to Daniel Brown, Esq.

A low, mocking laugh broke from the lips of the avenger as he opened this and read the contents aloud.

It was signed by the chief of police of Denver City, and gave the detective authority to raise and arm whatever force of men he might deem necessary to exterminate the band of criminals led by the so-called Captain Moonshine.

The detective made no reply to the taunting comments of his captors. He knew that the discovery of this paper had inevitably sealed his fate, and like the brave man he was, he resolved to die game, since die he must.

"You have one chance left," now remarked Wilder, sternly. "Tell me where I can lay hands on that certificate. You shall be held as a hostage until the paper is in my possession, but when it is safe, we will set you free on condition that you immediately return to Denver and give over your plans against the family."

"I know nothing about the paper, as I told you before."

"Beware! This is your last chance. Refuse now, and by all the fiends in Tophet, you die the death of a dog!" cried the avenger, with a fierce earnestness that the detective felt was genuine.

But he made no reply, and only smiled scornfully as the outlaw flashed a knife before his eyes. One moment of terrible suspense—then a scurrying cloud had swept over the face of the moon.

Slowly the moon stole out from behind the somber veil. Its silvery light fell over the wild, rocky crags, and shone down upon a dread and ghastly sight.

A body lay upon the blood-stained stone. Beside it stood a man, confronting three others. In one hand he held a blood-stained knife. In the other, a human head, his fingers fastened in the fair hair. Slowly the head swung around until the moonlight fell upon the clear-cut handsome features. They were those of Dan Brown of Denver!

And once more the moon veiled her face behind a cloud.

Through the darkness came sounds of devilish laughter, then a sullen plash up from the gloomy abyss. And then the sound of hoof-strokes in rapid retreat as the outlaws fled from the scene of their horrible crime, laughing in glee at the thought that the human bloodhound was off their trail forever!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GRAVE THAT LOVE DUG.

Two nights after that which witnessed the dread tragedy beside Devil's Gulch. Now, as then, the moon was shining brightly, but in a clear and unclouded sky.

From out the grove in which the Vigilantes hung the wild lover of Ruth Crabtree, a human form glided and noiselessly approached the Crabtree ranch, just as on that other night, Will Wilder stole forth to meet his lady love. And to complete the resemblance, the clear light of the night-queen falls upon the same form, the same features as then—only now there may be seen traces left by bitter passions, where before all was smooth and pleasant.

The remembrance seemed to strike him, for a hard bitter laugh broke from his shaded lips.

"Then an ardent lover, eager to clasp his fair, gentle bride to his bosom—now, an avenger! Curses by the thousand rest upon the white head of that hoary hypocrite! Only that I hope to cut him deeper to the heart, I would put the torch to his house and laugh aloud in the joy of fulfilled vengeance as I thrust him and his back into the roaring flames! And that is what it will end in—I swear it!"

Muttering thus Wilder stole up to the house. All around was still. The herders on guard over the corrals appeared to be sleeping, or else the terrible fate which had overtaken their two comrades, kept them close under cover; too close for the good of the master they served.

Not a sound came from inside the building. Doubtless all were firmly locked in slumber. Nothing could be heard or seen of the dog, and Wilder smiled grimly as he stood at the end of the house, gazing up to the window which opened into the bed-chamber occupied by Ruth Crabtree.

The lower sash was raised, the night being close and sultry.

"One would think Ruth was expecting me," he muttered with a strange smile that transformed his comely face into that of a veritable demon of evil. "The dainty darling shall not be disappointed. She shall see how powerful is true love!"

Chuckling grimly, Wilder glided toward the stable and picked up a heavy rail which he knew

would serve his purpose. Bearing this to the house, he gently placed one end against the building, then, after a keen glance around him, he slowly, cautiously began creeping up the timber.

He paused once more when his head was just below the level of the open window, and listened intently. At first he could hear nothing, but then there came to his strained ears the low, regular sound of breathing from within. He knew that this breathing came from one soundly sleeping, and thus encouraged, he grasped the window-sill and silently drew himself inside the chamber.

Crouching down in the corner, he assured himself that his entrance had not disturbed the sleeper, then arose and peered ahead. The moon, though not shining directly into the room, gave light sufficient for his purpose. He could distinguish the low bedstead and more!

It was only by swiftly clasping one hand over his mouth that he stifled the exclamation of surprise and annoyance that rose in his throat as he made a particularly disagreeable discovery: that, though Ruth Crabtree lay there calmly slumbering, she did not occupy the bed alone!

A dark head lay beside the fair one, and the dim light revealed a face even fairer than that of Will Wilder's love. Ruth Crabtree lay clasped in the arms of Rachel Trowbridge.

The midnight prowler saw that the difficulty of his task was thus more than doubled, but he had come prepared for any emergency. Had the danger been double what it was, he would not have retreated now.

He knew that Noah Crabtree and his son David must be sleeping on the floor below. They would be awakened by the first cry of alarm from above. They would rush to the rescue, and then naught save speedy flight could save him from punishment.

Producing a handkerchief and a bottle filled with a clear, colorless liquid, he liberally moistened the one from the other, then crept silently to the bedside. Silently he held the drugged rag close to the nostrils of Rachel Trowbridge, his other hand hovering above the face of Ruth Crabtree. It was well that he had taken this precaution.

The sickening fumes of the drug caused Rachel to cough and awake, her great black eyes filling with a nameless horror as she beheld the grim, shadowy form bending over the bed. She started and strove to shriek aloud, but swift and remorseless as the hand of fate, the member holding the medicated handkerchief descended upon her mouth and nostrils, holding her motionless despite herself.

Her start awakened Ruth, who also strove to rise, only to be crushed back by the strong hand of the avenger, who hissed venomously in her ear:

"Make a sound and I'll slit your dainty throat from ear to ear! You know me—Will Wilder!"

To make all sure, he leaned forward upon the bed, pressing his whole weight upon their limbs, holding them motionless.

For a brief space he felt Rachel Trowbridge struggling in both mind and body against the baleful influence of the sickening drug; then her muscles relaxed, and he knew that the most dangerous part of his work was done. Still he held the chloroform in place for nearly a minute longer, to make all sure, then arose, though still grasping Ruth.

There was little need of this violence, however. The terrible surprise had nearly stupefied the poor girl, and the words he hissed in her ear completed the work.

Wilder chuckled grimly as he saw how helpless she lay, for he believed that the rest would be easy now. It was more than he had dared hope for.

He saw that Ruth was still conscious, and seating himself coolly upon the edge of the bed, he spoke, low and rapidly:

"Your modesty is terribly shocked by my rudeness, I suppose, but under the circumstances, you can't blame me much. Besides, we have been as good as man and wife for a week past. But, let that go, for the present."

"Let me warn you. I am a desperate man, made so by your father and his cowardly hounds. He is sleeping below you, and by a single scream you can bring him up here; but that cry will prove his death-warrant! I solemnly swear to shoot down any and every person who may attempt to baffle me now. You are mine. You pledged your life to me. I come to let you redeem your promise. When I leave this, you go with me. If not—then we will all be dead."

In fear and trembling Ruth heard this fierce speech. She could scarcely believe that this unscrupulous ruffian could be her former gentle, noble-hearted lover. He seemed transformed into a veritable demon.

"You can have all the time you choose for reflecting upon the decision you are to give, but remember that each moment thus spent increases the chance of my discovery by your people, and thus brings them the nearer death's door. I have sworn to have my bride, or my revenge—suit yourself."

"What is it you want?" she faltered, in a husky whisper.

"You," came the prompt response. "You belong to me. Dead or alive you shall be mine. If you will go quietly, well and good. If not, then I will compel you. Which is it?"

"Spare me—go and leave me!" gasped the terrified girl. "I will never tell—no one shall ever know—"

"You are only wasting your breath," was the remorseless interruption. "I have undergone more for you than ever man endured for woman before! I was wounded, flogged until my back was cut into ribbons of bloody flesh, and then I was hung like a sheep-killing cur! And for what? Because I dared to love you—only that!"

Ruth shuddered at the bitter malignancy with which these words were rapidly enunciated. Whatever love she might have felt for this man was dead now. The entering wedge had been when he insisted on her continuing her flight on that fateful night, after she begged to be allowed to retrace her steps. Bit by bit the black doubts grew amid her sorrow and self-abasement, until the night when the avenger dealt his first blows of bitter retribution. There came a great revulsion. She saw in the man who had won her young heart's first love a ruthless assassin. It was a bitter shock, and she well-nigh sunk beneath it, but there was a trace of the old Crabtree spirit underlying her gentle nature, and Ruth was in a fair way of recovering when Wilder made his second and more audacious stroke.

His brutal conduct completed the cure. Her love for him was dead and buried. In its place came an unutterable horror, even loathing. It seemed to her that if this man should touch her, that it would kill her outright. His mere presence in the room appeared to poison the atmosphere and render it unfit for pure lungs to breathe.

Her lips parted in the attempt to speak, but no sound issued therefrom. An iron hand seemed clutching her throat.

"Silence gives consent," added Wilder, with a low, diabolical laugh. "It is as well to spare words. Your father is a light sleeper, and might be alarmed. You know what would happen then? He would rush up here—perhaps David and your mother would follow him. He would open the door—and then die! One after the other I would shoot them down—and then bear you, my dainty bride, away in my arms over their bleeding corpses."

"Spare them—and me!" gasped Ruth, her brain reeling. "Go—I will never betray you—I will never tell—"

"No more," he rudely interposed. "You might as well plead to a lump of stone. I came for you—I mean to take you away with me. If you prove ugly, then I will chloroform you as I have your friend yonder. Take your choice."

"What am I to do?" faltered Ruth.

"Arise and dress yourself, unless you prefer to take your bridal tour in that charming costume! But remember! If the alarm is given those below, whether intentionally or not, death will surely follow. I have gone too far to draw back or hesitate now."

"I will remember, not for my own sake, but for theirs," said Ruth, with greater steadiness than she had before shown. "Spare my shame as much as you can. I promise to make no outcry."

The road agent visibly hesitated as he gazed keenly upon the speaker, seeking to read her inmost thoughts through her snow-pale face by the dim, uncertain light which filled the low chamber. He was loth to lose even a morsel of his carefully brooded revenge, but he saw something in the maiden's eyes that warned him to yield. Despite his repeated threats, he had no desire to encounter Noah Crabtree that night, not through fear, but his revenge would be less exquisite.

"Very good; you shall have your own way so far as it can be granted without danger to my plans—to our elopement."

As he uttered these words Wilder turned toward the window, and as he did so, a sharp exclamation of annoyance rose to his lips, for from a long distance he saw three rockets soar high into the air at brief but regular intervals. More than once he had witnessed the same signal, and knew only too well that it was the summons for the Vigilantes to take the field, armed, mounted and ready for stern, desperate work.

A single moment of breathless suspense—then he bit his lip fiercely to check a sonorous curse of rage as he heard the herdsmen calling aloud to each other, then hastening toward the house, doubtless for the purpose of arousing Noah Crabtree.

With a quick, cat-like leap he was beside Ruth, holding the point of a bared knife against her bosom.

"Not a word—not a sound—or I lay you a corpse at my feet!" he snarled, as the loud knocking was heard upon the outside. "Quiet, or death to you and death to them!"

They could hear Noah and his son as they arose and answered the startling summons.

"Three rockets from Tom Munro's ranch, boss!" cried one of the herdsmen. "Thar's music in the air, I reckon!"

They could hear Crabtree bid the men hasten to saddle horses for the road; they could hear him talking to his wife and son, and each moment they dreaded to hear him or one of the others ascending the steep stairs for some reason.

But this did not occur, and Wilder drew a long breath of relief as he heard the outer door close, and he tiptoed to the window to note the further movements of the men.

"Lucky for us all!" he muttered, with a grim chuckle. "Let them get fairly started, then for our romantic elopement!"

Better for him, perhaps, if he had not uttered this last taunt. It maddened Ruth, by showing her the fate he held in store, and with a courage born of despair, she sprung forward and flung herself heavily against the ruffian, causing him to lose his balance and fall headlong through the open window. She heard the sickening thud, then uttered a piercing scream, falling to the floor in a nerveless heap, senseless!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE AVENGER DEALS ANOTHER BLOW.

NOAH CRABTREE heard that swooning cry, and recognized the voice of his daughter, just as he was on the point of mounting his horse to answer the rocket-signal.

Followed by David and the others, he rushed toward the house to solve the mystery of that piercing shriek.

Only for one of the hounds, Wilder might even then have escaped, though bruised, bleeding and half-stunned by his unexpected fall from the chamber window. He was scrambling to his feet in a dazed manner, when the dog discovered him and rushed barking toward him. Straight at his throat the fierce brute leaped, its powerful jaws closing upon the arm which Wilder instinctively raised to shield his face.

The man was flung back against the end of the building, which saved him from falling. The sharp pain in his wounded arm recalled his scattered senses, and drawing his knife, he plunged it to the hilt in the animal's belly, fairly disemboweling it with a furious downward slash. The dog fell dead, but it had performed its duty, and Wilder uttered a furious curse as he saw the enemy, led by Noah Crabtree, rushing upon him.

He never gave one thought to escape now. He saw the white-haired chief of the Vigilantes before him, and the remembrance of that horrible scene in the lone grove rendered him fairly insane. With a snarling cry that was more like the yell of a wild beast than aught human, he leaped forward, brandishing his blood-dripping knife, thinking only of the vengeance he had so earnestly sworn.

But it was no feeble girl whom he had to deal with now. With an activity remarkable in one of his age, Noah Crabtree eluded his rush and the venomous thrust aimed at his life, at the same time dealing him a blow with his revolver-butt that hurled him to the ground, senseless.

A cry of stern wonder broke from his lips as he bent over the fallen man, turning his face upward in the clear moonlight. A momentary chill of superstition crept over him, for he felt that he was looking upon the face of the dead—of the man whom he had seen hung by the neck more than a week before. But this feeling was not of long duration. There must have been a grave mistake. By some means unknown Will Wilder had escaped death by the rope, and he was the stern avenger who had arisen to scourge them.

"Bind him hand and foot and hold him safe until I return," he said to his awe-stricken men, then hastened to the house, where he found a state of terrible confusion.

Rachel Trowbridge was still insensible, the noxious fumes of the chloroform yet lingering on the air and explaining much of what had happened. Ruth was just recovering, under the care of her agitated mother, and incoherently trying to explain what had occurred.

Noah Crabtree soon heard enough, and with hard-set features he returned to where his herdsmen were guarding the prisoner. During this interval they had satisfied themselves that he was really in the flesh, and were questioning him as to how he had managed to escape from what all had believed was the death-noose. But not a word would he utter in response to their inquiries.

It was different when Noah Crabtree came up. A torrent of curses and reviling burst from the lips of the prisoner. He literally foamed at the mouth, and when the old man drew close beside him he spat at him and wrestled like an infuriated giant with the stout lassoes that confined him.

Just then Ruth came rushing out of the house, still pale and trembling, fearing the worst from the loud, angry words she had caught. The moment Wilder caught sight of her, his ravings ceased, though the devilish look deepened in his eyes.

"Father," faltered Ruth, abashed by the inquiring glance which the stern old man turned upon her, "spare his life. Show mercy—he has had much to afflict him—"

"Spare your blushes and your breath, Ruth,"

broke in Wilder with an insolent assumption of tenderness. "I ask no favors at his hands—ten thousand curses rest upon his head—"

One of the herdsmen unceremoniously checked his speech by planting a broad boot-sole upon his lips with no great degree of tenderness.

"Go back to the house, daughter," sternly uttered Crabtree, shaking her hand from his arm. "This is no scene for you, nor are your lips the ones to plead in his behalf. Return to your mother at once."

Shaken, weakened by all that she had undergone, Ruth obeyed, but there was a deep regret in her eyes as they lingered for a moment upon the face of the prisoner.

"He has bin tried an' condemned; reckon we've the right to string him up out o' hand, an' then it won't hender us from answerin' the call from Munro's," spoke one of the herdsmen.

"No; that would look as though we were afraid to let our justice see the light of day," replied Crabtree. "We will hold him safe until we learn what Munro wants. Then, when the entire band can be present, we will give him another trial. If found guilty of murdering our friends, then the doom which the majority may pronounce, shall be carried out without fear or favor."

The prisoner laughed, low and mockingly.

"You killed me once, yet I came back from the grave to seek vengeance for my bitter wrongs. So it will be again. My spirit will never rest while one of those who scourged and then hung me, treads the footstool and breathes the breath of life—I swear it! Two of them have already fallen—the rest shall follow. You are doomed—doomed one and all!"

"David," said Crabtree, paying no attention to this wild outburst, "you will remain behind and guard the prisoner. We will place him in the house. Close and lock the doors. Watch him close, and if he attempts to escape, or if there is any attempt on the part of his friends in evil to rescue him, blow his brains out."

Four men raised the bound form in their arms and bore it into the house, laying it upon the floor in one corner. Then they departed to collect the horses which had been let loose in the excitement of the unexpected alarm.

Noah Crabtree bade Ruth and her mother go up-stairs to pass the remainder of the night with Rachel, who was just recovering from the effects of the chloroform, then repeated his instructions to David.

Wilder watched the lad curiously as he closed and secured the door after the form of his father. He knew that David was a trusted member of the band to which he belonged, and bound by a frightful oath to lend succor to any and all brothers in distress. Not for a moment did he believe that the lad would dare refuse to set him at liberty when he uttered the distress call. And this he made almost as soon as the hoof-strokes of the departing Vigilantes died away in the distance.

"You may as well spare your breath, Wilder," was the unexpected response. "You heard my instructions. I mean to carry them out to the very letter."

The outlaw stared aghast at the lad, who doggedly met his gaze. It was clear that he spoke in sober earnest.

"I give the distress call, and you dare refuse to respond?"

"Yes—and I would were you the captain himself," was the sullen response. "You assaulted my sister—would have carried her away, only for her bravery. That deed absolves me from my oath—and I am getting disgusted with the whole business, anyway. I am more of a slave to the family than a free man. I mean to cut it all—"

"Cut your own throat, you mean! Fool! you cannot retreat. Dare to attempt it—refuse to set me at liberty, and before the setting of another sun, there will be fifty keen knives ready to drain your heart of the last drop of treacherous blood!"

"Two can play at that game. One word from me, and the family will have all they can attend to—the Vigilantes will make things hot for them."

"Enough will escape to insure your death—be certain of that. Come—enough of nonsense. Set me free. Your own safety demands it, I tell you."

"Do you know what I am thinking of at this moment?" slowly uttered David, squatting down beside the prisoner and toying significantly with a revolver as he spoke. "You can betray me to the Vigilantes, if they find you alive on their return. I believe you have already decided to do so. At any rate, I would be a fool to give you the chance."

"What do you mean?" impatiently demanded Wilder.

"You heard what father said? If you tried to escape, I was to blow your brains out. One touch of my finger—that would end it all! And the devil is whispering in my ear at this very moment—'Do it—kill him and say that he was trying to escape when you fired the shot!'"

There was a dangerous light in his eyes as he uttered these words, and Wilder saw that he was powerfully tempted to carry out the covert threat. Only his iron nerve prevented his coun-

from changing. At that instant he knew that his life hung by a frail thread.

"You forgot one little thing," he said, his voice as firm as though he was wholly at his ease. "When the Vigilantes do return, they will help me know that you killed me. And there are three members of the family with the band. How long would it be before they spread the news of your treachery to the four winds? And then—you know what would follow."

"I know that were I to set you free, you would lie my life away in revenge," sullenly replied David, lowering the weapon.

"You know no such thing. By setting me free, you prove yourself a true brother, and as such you shall be reported."

David made no reply, but sat in moody silence, and Wilder was content to let him remain thus while he keenly watched the working of the lad's countenance. He felt that there could be but one decision. Life is very dear to one so young, and David knew only too well what sudden punishment was meted out by "the family" to a recreant member. It was a bitter pill he was being forced to swallow, but Wilder felt that gulped down it would be in the end.

Nor was he mistaken. After a long silence, David spoke:

"If I set you free, will you swear to go away and never molest us—at least Ruth—again?"

"After the manner in which she treated me, I am not likely to bother her again," replied Wilder, with a short, hard laugh. "You know how it was. We loved each other. We were engaged to be married, and only waited for your father's consent. That he refused to give without rhyme or reason. We endured this for a time, but then Ruth consented to elope with me."

"We made the attempt, and you know how it ended. I was assaulted, and because I used weapons in defense of my life, I was tried by a mock court and sentenced. Life for life, I was ready to pay. Had they only killed me, it would not have been so bad. But they tied me up and flogged me like a dog! And then they strung me up by the neck."

"Of course I didn't die, I was cut down and restored to life. Who did it, does not matter now. I only mention these things to show how much I underwent for love of your sister. And how did she repay me? By throwing me once more into the power of my bitterest enemies! Deep as my love was, it cannot survive such a blow. I never want to see her again. The moment I am free I will hasten to see the captain and get transferred to Idaho. None of you will ever be troubled by me again. Is this satisfactory?"

"If you are speaking the truth, yes. But mind, if you are lying just in order to gain your freedom, I swear that I will have you hunted down to death if it costs my own life!"

As he spoke, David cut the bonds that confined Wilder, then unfasted the door. As he did so, the treacherous ruffian caught up a chair and dealt the lad a terrible blow upon the head, felling him to the floor like a dead man.

With a fierce laugh Wilder deprived the senseless lad of his weapons, then snatched up the lamp and ran hastily up-stairs.

He knew that the women had not yet fallen asleep, and felt sure they had heard the fall of David below, for he could now hear their excited voices.

He burst in upon them like the personification of evil, laughing sardonically as they shrunk back from his approach.

"Come, Ruth, my dainty darling, the clergyman awaits us to put the seal upon our bliss—"

Mrs. Crabtree sprung between with an appealing cry, but he remorselessly felled her with the butt of his pistol, then his strong right arm closed around the trembling form of the half-fainting maiden.

He bore Ruth down-stairs, then hurled the lamp to the floor, pausing long enough to see that the spilled oil had ignited from the blazing wick. With a diabolical laugh he left the house and bore his senseless prey toward the grove.

CHAPTER XXV

MARAUDING MOONSHINERS.

At the same hour and minute that Wilder left the grove in his stealthy advance upon the Crabtree ranch, a force composed of nearly a score well armed and mounted men were trotting rapidly over the prairie, following a course that would, if continued half an hour longer, carry them to Jack Gill's ranch.

Each rider was shrouded in a heavy black cloak that reached the knee. Each head and face was hidden under a sable, cowl-like hood. Thus attired no one residing in that portion of Colorado could have doubted their identity. They were a portion of Captain Moonshine's notorious band of road-agents, out on a raid.

They were led by the doughty captain in person. The work he had in view was too important to be intrusted to other hands than his own.

He drew rein sharply, and his men followed suit.

"The time has come when you must understand the work before you," he said, in clear, incisive tones as the masked horsemen gathered closer around him. "I did not mention it be-

fore, because the business is too important to run any unnecessary risk. I do not accuse any particular person of treachery, because I am at a loss to imagine who can be the traitor, but there must be some one among us who is trying to play a double game. On no other supposition can our many recent failures be accounted for."

"I don't need to remind you of what the laws of our family say—death to all traitors! But we are none of us safe while the false rascal is in our midst. Each one of us must constitute himself a detective and act as a spy upon his mates until the guilty one is discovered."

A deep, hoarse murmur ran around the group, and flashing eyes were visible through the slits in the black masks as each man glared suspiciously around upon his fellows.

Captain Moonshine appeared contented with the impression he had created, and resumed in an altered tone:

"For this reason I have kept our real business to-night from you all, until there would be no possible chance for a false member to betray our plans. I don't believe the traitor is among us at present. I have carefully selected you as the best and most trustworthy members of the family."

A low, united murmur of satisfaction told how this complimentary speech pleased the masked outlaws.

"Grizzly, you will select six men to bear you company. You will ride at speed for the ranch of Thomas Munro. He belongs to the Vigilantes, and you must manage matters so that he will send up the rocket-signal for the blood-hounds to assemble. How you do it, I care not. Break into the corrals and stampede his horses. Set his stacks on fire—do anything save hinder his sending up the signal for help. That must come, even though you have to butcher him and send the fireworks to the sky yourself!"

"That done, what then?" coolly asked the burly outlaw.

"Take care of yourself. Scatter and break trail as best you can, and return to the new retreat. Be sure that you leave no sign behind you that can be read. You understand me?"

Grizzly grunted assent, and began selecting the men whom he wished to bear him company. He did not like to act blindfold, but he knew Captain Moonshine too well to ask for further enlightenment.

No more was said until after the seven outlaws had ridden rapidly away in the direction of the Munro ranch then Captain Moonshine bade the remainder of the band follow him, riding slowly toward the house of Jack Gill.

When within half a mile of the ranch, Captain Moonshine once more drew rein, and addressed his followers:

"We have time now to fully understand what is before us. Grizzly and his men will cause Munro to send up the signal for the Vigilantes to gather to his aid. It is a rule with each ranch-owner to have at least one pair of eyes on the look-out for the signal, both day and night, and they are all bound by oath to immediately respond to the call. Noah Crabtree is the chief, Jack Gill the lieutenant of the company, and only sudden death could keep them from riding to the rescue. And they are the two whom we are most interested in to-night."

"You all know that Frank Blackwood is a member of the family, and one of the most valuable. You are all sworn to obey him even as you are me. He has done us many good offices, and rarely demands a service in return, but now he does."

"I don't fairly understand the matter myself, but somehow this new wife of old Jack Gill has got hold of some dangerous secrets—dangerous alike to Blackwood and to the family, so I understand—and must be put out of the way. Frank don't want her killed. She was an old flame of his, in the days gone by, I shrewdly suspect, and she still holds a tender spot in his heart. Any way, he wants her carried away to the retreat, where he can deal with her himself as the case demands."

"That is one part of our work; the other more nearly concerns myself. You remember my marrying Miss Rachel Trowbridge? For reasons of my own, I have been lenient with the wayward beauty thus long, but now I mean to assert my rights. The signal from Tom Munro's will call away the men from both ranches, and thus leave the coast clear for us. Then we will swoop down and carry off the dainty birds."

"Of course you know best, captain," said one of the cowed riders, "but it seems to me that we could kill two birds with one stone. The Vigilantes have sworn bitter war against us, and it was through them that we lost those stout lads in Grenada. We are strong enough to carry both places, and make it necessary for the Vigilantes to elect two more officers."

"The country is hot enough without that, Vampire. Every man in the State would take the trail after us. No, my plan is the best, because, if it succeeds we will hold two good hostages. I will see that they get word that the lives of our fair captives depend upon their actions—that if we are pressed too hard, they will find only the bodies of those they would rescue."

Even the sanguinary Vampire saw the cunning of this reasoning, and dismounting from

their horses, the outlaws composed themselves to await the rocket signal.

Captain Moonshine left them upon the prairie swell and stole forward in a stealthy, crawling, and only pausing when a covey of quail rose, from whence he could observe all that might transpire around the building.

He was not kept long in suspense. Grizzly and his men had ridden fast and performed their duty to the very letter.

The brilliant rockets soared high in the air, and that the signal had been seen by the look-out, Captain Moonshine was speedily given evidence.

He heard a sharp exclamation from among the corrals, and then excited voices. Crouching still lower he saw the herders as they hastened to the door of the house and knocked loudly to awaken Jack Gill.

He saw the door open, and the lieutenant, only half dressed but fully armed, emerge, demanding the cause of the disturbance.

"Three rockets from Tom Munro's, boss," was the reply.

"Look after the horses—I'll be there in a minute."

Jack Gill was as good as his word, and Captain Moonshine chuckled with a fiendish glee as he watched the entire party leap into the saddle and ride swiftly away to the rescue. This was more than he had dared hope. He believed that at least one man would be left behind as a guard.

Crawling away until safe from observation of the sole inmate of the ranch, Captain Moonshine then ran to where his men were awaiting his coming.

"All works well!" he cried, exultantly. "The woman is left alone, and we've only got to pick her up. Come!"

Some of the men seemed less pleased. True bull-dogs, they were not averse to a little fighting, particularly when the odds were in their favor.

Captain Moonshine led the way leisurely, not caring to reach the ranch too soon. It might be that Jack Gill had arranged some means by which his wife could signal him in case of need.

Knowing that only a feeble woman opposed him, he rode straight up to the door and rapped loudly.

"What's wanting?" demanded a clear, sharp voice, that of a woman beyond doubt, but betraying no trace of feminine fear and trembling.

"Open the door and save us the trouble of breaking it down!" sternly replied Captain Moonshine. "We want you, and the less trouble you give, the better for your health!"

A prompt response was given, but not in words. Two shots were fired in quick succession through a small loop-hole in the door. One of the outlaws fell from his horse, dead ere his body touched the ground. A second uttered a fierce curse of angry pain as his right arm swung helpless at his side. Captain Moonshine touched his horse with the spur and leaped aside. The bullet which had lodged in the brain of Vampire had cut its way through his cowl, fairly grazing his throat.

"Dismount and burst open the doors or windows!" he cried, angrily, setting the example himself. "Capture her—the man dies who harms her seriously!"

It was well that his influence was all-powerful, well for the brave woman that these words had been spoken. The outlaws were fearfully enraged by this unexpected and fatal resistance. Agnes Gill would have been murdered the moment she fell into their hands, had it not been for the stern command of Captain Moonshine.

Attacking upon every side, the outlaws quickly forced an entrance, and flung themselves upon the desperate woman, who fought them to the bitter end. Though no more of the road-agents fell, several were wounded in the last struggle.

"Lucky for you that I was here, woman," cried Captain Moonshine, as her hands were bound behind her. "My men would have torn you limb from limb—"

"Better that than falling into your power alive—Frank Blackwood!" she retorted, her voice full of bitter scorn.

The outlaw chief started back and stared at her for a moment in surprise, then laughed shortly.

"So you think I am Frank Blackwood, do you?"

"I know it! This world is not wide enough to hold two such dastardly scoundrels," was the dauntless reply.

"You are complimentary. I am pleased to be mistaken for an honest man," he said, mockingly.

"Heaven help the wicked if you call Frank Blackwood honest! A thief, a murderer—all that is foul and evil and despicable! And to cap all, the leader of a gang of midnight marauders, the notorious Captain Moonshine!"

"Your tongue is sharp, lady," laughed the chief, mockingly. "I don't envy Frank his reputation—for you may as well be told that we are taking all this trouble on his account."

Still, if any man can tame such a shrew, he can!"

"I know that there is nothing too evil for you to do—but why maintain this hollow mystery? You are Frank Blackwood. Nothing can make me believe different."

"Not even the evidence of your own eyesight?" he sneered, turning his back to his men and raising the heavy cowl that until now had concealed his features.

The clear moonlight streamed through the window and fell athwart his face—the same dark, handsome features which he had briefly revealed to Rachel Trowbridge on the night of her strange wedding. Agnes Gill stared at him in mute amazement. Until now she had firmly believed this man to be her rightful husband.

Captain Moonshine laughed mockingly as he lowered his mask, then turned to one of his men, bidding him catch up one of the horses from the corral, and prepare it for the lady.

This was quickly done, and placing her in charge of three men, Captain Moonshine bade them hasten with her to the retreat, taking care to avoid all observation.

Then he leaped into the saddle, crying aloud: "Now for my own bonny bride!" and plying spurs, he led the remainder of his force at a rapid pace over the prairies.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A STRANGE KNIGHT TO THE RESCUE.

SCARCELY had Wilder cleared the house, than Ruth Crabtree recovered from her brief swoon, and made a desperate effort to escape from his grasp. At one time, and not so many days since, to be clasped in his arms seemed little short of heaven to her, but now she shuddered and turned deathly sick at the mere contact. Her ideal was shattered. She knew him for a murderer—she believed that his ruthless hand had slain both her mother and her brother. The one she had seen fall helpless beneath that cruel blow; the other she saw just before the ruffian dashed down the lamp, and he, too, lay as one dead.

"Be quiet, unless you wish me to use still harsher measures," he growled in a stern, ugly voice, as his arm was contracted until it seemed as though the iron muscles would crush in her bones. "You've given me trouble enough. Don't provoke me further, or it'll be the worse for you."

His true nature was revealed now. He no longer kept up the mockery of a lover's role. And Ruth preferred this undisguised brutality to the former treatment. That revived the dead past too painfully.

Her struggles ceased, simply because his brute strength had temporarily paralyzed her, but the Crabtree spirit was now fairly awakened within her breast, and she was resolved to fight to the bitter end rather than let him triumph in his dastardly schemes.

Rapidly as possible with his burden, Wilder pressed on to the grove where his horse was hidden, along with a led animal which he had provided for Ruth in case his bold attempt at abduction should prove successful.

This was equipped with a man's saddle, the better to avert suspicion if his coming should be noticed, but that mattered not. By turning the right stirrup over the seat, letting it hang thus shortened down the other side, the difficulty was remedied. It would not be the first time Ruth had used a like substitute for a side-saddle.

"Now girl, listen to me for a few minutes, and pay attention to my words," said the desperado, bluntly. "I have taken too much trouble and run too much risk to be foiled now. You have often sworn that your heart was wholly mine—"

"That was when I deemed you an honest, true-hearted man, and all worthy of my love," interposed Ruth, her voice strangely calm and steady. "It is different now. I know you for an assassin—my mother and brother are dead, slain by you—"

"You are the only one that will ever know it then," said Wilder, with a ferocious laugh that fairly curdled her blood. "Fire leaves no trail—look back and tell me what you see!"

Mechanically the poor girl turned her head and glanced back toward the house where she had spent so many happy days. She could see the red flames beginning to show themselves through the windows and the open door. The building had taken fire from the shattered lamp as Wilder intended. As he hinted, the devouring flames would soon lick up the significant evidence of his horrible crimes. The Vigilantes were far away and riding hard in another direction. Before the glow could alarm them—before they could ride back—all would be over. The bones of her dear ones might be found, and all would believe that she, too, had perished in the flames.

She realized the horrible truth, and her overtasked spirit gave way. A low, gasping moan parted her lips and but for the ready arm of the desperado, she would have fallen prone upon the ground.

A short, chilling laugh parted his lips. He was well satisfied with the turn matters had taken. He had seen that his victim meant mis-

chief, and he had dealt her this cruel blow as the surest means of crushing her rising spirit.

Steadying her form upon the neck of his horse, he leaped into the saddle and rode away at a rapid trot, the free horse following its mate without any compulsion.

Wilder did not head toward the retreat of the outlaws. He had undertaken this venture without the knowledge of Captain Moonshine, for he believed that worthy would forbid him if the truth was known, as being dangerous to the welfare of the band.

Neither did he know aught of the work the road-agent chief had cut out for that same night. He had obeyed orders in capturing and forever silencing the bold detective pointed out to him by Frank Blackwood, had returned and reported the deed done, then rode away on his own concerns, lying low until his plans were perfected, lest Captain Moonshine should give him work to do which would conflict with his own schemes.

It was his intention to bear Ruth far away from that section, and only return after he had tired of her, to complete his vengeance upon all those yet living against whom he had sworn the death hunt.

The rapid motion of the horse through the cool night air served to revive the fainting maiden, and as soon as her consciousness had returned fully, Wilder drew rein.

"Now I will finish what I started to tell you back yonder in the grove where your dear father scourged and then hung me," he said with a savage bitterness in his tones. "It is no use for you to fight against fate. You are mine by your own solemn pledge. We are only completing to-night the little bridal tour we began a week ago. If you are wise, you will make the best of what cannot be helped. Go with me you must, and unless you consent to ride alone, without making any attempt at escape, then I must carry you in my arms."

"I will ride alone," murmured the poor girl, shrinking from him with a sensation of unspeakable loathing.

He saw this—felt her shrink away from him—and the devilish passions burst forth afresh. With a short, fierce laugh, he bent his head and pressed his hot lips to hers.

She struggled desperately, and partially freeing herself, uttered a wild, appealing cry for help. Wilder laughed, sneeringly, for he felt that they were alone upon the wide prairie, that no human ear could hear that piteous cry—but then a fierce curse took the place of his diabolical merriment.

Clear and menacing there came an answering cry—the shout of a bold man—and immediately after he could hear the rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs upon the hard earth.

He glanced backward—he saw a horseman riding swiftly toward him, along his trail. He knew that Ruth's cry had been heard and understood, that at least one man was speeding to her aid. How many more there was coming behind, he could only surmise.

There was no time now for changing horses. To make the attempt would give the stranger ample time to overtake him, even should Ruth make no resistance. But this she was doing. The cheering shout had reached her ears, and nerved by that hope, she struggled desperately to fling herself to the ground, even at the risk of broken bones or of being beaten down by the hoofs of the startled horses.

Uttering a fierce, snarling curse, Wilder raised his clenched fist and dealt her a cruel blow full in the face. It was effectual. With one moaning cry, the poor girl hung helplessly upon his arm.

A vengeful shout came from behind. The stranger had noted that dastardly act by the clear moonlight, and plying his now bloody spurs, he thundered on in pursuit.

Wilder knew that unless he abandoned his senseless victim, it would result in a chase for life or death, but had the risk been double what it was, he would never have consented to throw away the cream of his deeply meditated revenge.

"Let the bold fool look to himself!" he muttered darkly, casting a backward glance over his shoulder at the rapidly oncoming horseman. "The first he knows he'll find himself running against a snag."

The stranger apparently felt no fear of this. He urged on his horse with both voice and spurs, riding like one born to the pig-skin. He was getting more out of the animal than one out of a hundred riders could. The creature was a good one, but had been ridden long and hard before this mad race began. In less skillful hands, it would have fallen hopelessly in the rear ere a mile had been traversed. Instead, encouraged and aided by its rider, the noble creature was a little more than holding its own, creeping up nearer the fugitive, inch by inch, foot by foot.

Wilder realized this significant fact, and he knew that each minute which passed would make the matter worse. His mount was a good one, but it carried full one hundred pounds of dead weight, and this must soon tell in such a stern race. Had he only been able to place

Ruth upon the other horse and fasten her firmly in the saddle, then all would have been well.

There was one chance left him. Even while burdened with the senseless maiden, he believed he could shift from one horse to the other in safety, without materially slackening his speed. If so, he might yet shake off this bold pursuer.

Had he been alone, he would have turned and faced the stranger, for he was no coward. As it was, he showed his teeth like a reluctantly retreating tiger, half-tempted to turn and meet his pursuer at the pistol muzzle. His fear that Ruth might receive a bullet intended for himself was all that hindered him from doing so.

Thus the chase swept on over the dry, level plain for mile after mile, the pursuer slowly lessening the intervening distance by his superb skill in handling his jaded horse, until there was not more than one hundred yards separating the chaser and pursued.

Wilder saw that it was high time for him to put his plan of changing horses into operation. The stranger was now within pistol range, and might open fire at any moment. Once astride the free horse, he could laugh at all pursuit. The animal was running easily, by far the freshest and fastest of the three.

Promptly obedient to the whistle of its master, the horse edged alongside its mate, and Wilder freed his feet from the stirrups, shifting Ruth to his left arm, preparatory to putting the perilous plan into operation.

But other ears had heard that whistle, and as the stranger saw the two horses drawing together, he readily divined the truth. Quick as thought his right hand was raised and the revolver held in it spoke out sharply. The one shot was enough. With a loud snort of pain, the free horse plunged forward upon its head, one leg paralyzed if not broken by the bullet. And in falling, its feet became entangled with those of the horse bestrode by Wilder. In vain the creature tried to keep from falling. Plunging frantically forward it fell headlong to the ground.

Wilder alighted upon his feet, like a cat, but the event was so unexpected that the weight of Ruth destroyed his balance, and he also came to the ground with stunning force.

With an exultant shout the stranger thundered on, leaping to the ground without trying to check his horse, for he knew that such a pause would be fatal.

The desperado had already regained his feet and was drawing a revolver. As the stranger alighted before him, he raised the weapon. At the same moment the wide hat flew off, and the bright moonlight fell fairly athwart the face of his antagonist. What he saw there disturbed his aim. The pistol exploded, but the missile hissed harmlessly past the ear of its intended victim.

"God of mercy! who are you?" he gasped in a tone of horror, reeling and staggering back as though drunk.

"Dan Brown of Denver, at your service!" laughed the man as he leaped forward and grappled with the desperado.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CLOUD OF MYSTERY BREAKING AWAY.

WILDER seemed fairly stupefied and made scarcely any resistance. The sight of that pale, handsome face was more terrible to him than an army of bloodthirsty enemies, for only two nights ago, he had with his own hands killed the man to whom it belonged. He had driven his keen knife home until he felt its haft grate against his ribs over his heart. And not only that, but in order that there might be no possible doubt, with that same blood-dripping blade he had deliberately severed the detective's head from its trunk, ending by hurling them both down into the black depth of Devil's Gulch.

And yet—here was the same man boldly confronting him, a cold smile upon his stern lips, an avenging glow in his eyes, his head upon his shoulders! Was it a ghost? Could the dead come back to wreak vengeance upon their destroyers?

It was these horrible thoughts that unnerved the desperado and left him but a plaything in the hands of the detective, who sought to capture, not kill. A brief struggle, then Dan Brown of Denver arose alone, while Wilder lay upon his back, handcuffs upon his wrists and a superstitious fear filling his staring eyes.

The detective turned quickly to where Ruth Crabtree lay, still senseless, the moonlight falling upon her face, white as snow save for the discolored bruise which marked the brutal blow delivered by the outlaw.

The glad cry was frozen upon his lips, and the detective started back as though he, too, had unexpectedly looked upon a ghost.

"Not Rachel—not Miss Trowbridge!" he gasped, passing one hand mechanically across his brow as though to clear away the mist of error. "Who is this?" he demanded, turning fiercely upon the outlaw. "You stole her away from that house—from where Miss Trowbridge was stopping!"

Brief as had been the period since his fall, Wilder had in a great measure recovered from his superstitious terror. The actions of the detective were too human for him to be a spirit,

and surely only solid bone and muscle possessed such a resistless gripe. The wonderful likeness was still a mystery, but surely this was a living man.

He uttered a hard, reckless laugh as the detective turned upon him. Even while knowing that he himself was surely doomed, he felt pleasure in the thought that his captor was doomed to a terrible disappointment. *Before this Rachel Trowbridge was dead—her bones calcined amid the ruins of the Crabtree ranch!*

"That lady is the daughter of Noah Crabtree, my promised bride," he said, with his natural effrontery. "Of course since you have discovered your mistake, you will set me at liberty and apologize for your folly."

"Instead, I mean to take you back to your proposed father-in-law, and let him make the necessary apologies," retorted Dan Brown, recovering his usual composure as by magic. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, the Vigilantes will hold a grand jubilee over your return."

While these words were being interchanged, Ruth recovered her consciousness and overheard the last sentence uttered by the detective. Feebly she arose, and though scarcely able to stand, staggered toward the two men.

The detective heard her approach, and gently lent her the aid and support she so much needed. Wilder glared at them for a moment, then laughed bitterly.

"Better make sure that you are well rid of the old love before you begin casting sheep's eyes at the new, Ruth!"

"Silence! or I'll secure your scoffing tongue even faster than I have your arms!" sternly cried Brown.

"He is right, sir," said Ruth, faintly, but choking down her weakness with a noble effort. "Time was when I did love him—when he was the very life of my soul! And though that love is dead now, yet I would not see him suffer for the terrible crimes he has committed. If you take him back as you threatened, he will be killed—and all through life I must feel that his death lies at my door. I beg of you, let him go—go far away from here where he is not known, and where he may live a better life. Give him time to repent of his sins—"

"I deeply regret that I cannot grant your prayer, lady," said Brown kindly but with a firmness that instantly killed all hope. "This man has sinned heavily—he is a member of a band of assassins led by Captain Moonshine. It would be a crime scarcely less than those he has committed were I, an officer sworn to do my duty, to turn him loose to prey again upon society."

"It cuts you to the very core, I know," laughed Wilder, recklessly. "You'll not sleep for a month for weeping over the stern necessity. Bah! such talk makes me sick! But you, Miss Crabtree, were in earnest, and I thank you. You are a true Christian, even if you are old Noah's daughter, and I will do for your sake what I once swore should die a secret with me. Only tell me one thing. Your love for Will Wilder was genuine? You really loved him before that black night?"

"I did," faintly responded the maiden.

"Then you can cherish his memory still, for I swear to you that he was worthy of your purest love. You start. Listen and I will prove it to you."

"On that night when you were to escape from home, the real Will Wilder was murdered by the Vigilantes. Your father acted as judge, and stood by while the double sentence was carried out. I was hidden in the grove, and I saw it all, though I didn't know then who the victim really was. Had I even suspected the truth, there would have been a few vacancies in the band, or I would have died beside him—my twin brother!"

Pale and trembling Ruth listened to the strange revelation. She could scarcely believe her ears, yet she felt that the desperado was speaking only the truth.

"We were brought up together, but then our parents died, and we gradually drifted apart. There was wild blood in our veins, and as we grew to manhood, it began to show itself. Will and I—my name is Dick—had a quarrel, and from that day until the night when he was murdered, we never met again."

"As for me, I went to the bad, and have been one of the right-hand men of Captain Moonshine. It was while acting under his orders that I waylaid Tom Munro, who caught a glimpse of my unmasked face. You know what a strong resemblance there must have been. So he swore, on that mock trial, that it was Will Wilder who robbed him."

"I didn't know this then. As I said, though I was near enough to see a portion of the tragedy, I could not hear the words. I learned these particulars from one of our spies, some time afterward."

"He was found guilty, and sentenced first to be flogged, then strung up by the neck until he was dead. The double sentence was duly carried out. When his murderers were satisfied that he was dead, they went away, and I cut the body down. Not until that moment, when I saw his face, all discolored and distorted, did I

even suspect the truth. And then, over his dead body I knelt down and swore to wreak a terrible vengeance upon each and every one of his assassins. And had I been given time, I would have kept that oath to the very letter!"

"I bore his body away and buried it where I knew nothing would disturb it. Then I took the trail. I dealt two blows, but was hunted so hotly that I was obliged to lie low until the worst of the storm should blow over. But that gave me time to form and mature my plans. As the result, I acted as I have this night. You were included in my vengeance, because you were the daughter of Noah Crabtree, and because I deemed you the first cause of Will's death. I am sorry now for my abuse of you—that only, not for anything else. I only regret that I have not done more to avenge the murder of my poor brother—curses forever haunt their footsteps!"

Like one in a trance, Ruth had listened to this startling revelation, but now, with a faint sigh, she once more swooned.

Dan Brown gently lowered her to the ground and did all he could to restore her. He partially succeeded, but he could see that the poor girl needed more and tenderer care than he could afford her there upon the plains, and he at once made his preparations for returning to the Crabtree ranch.

More used to tragic scenes and revelations, he was but little if any softened by the story told by Dick Wilder, and was more than ever resolved to turn him over to the Vigilantes to answer for his repeated crimes.

Uncoiling the lasso from his saddle-bow, he fitted the noose around the desperado's neck, saying:

"We cannot travel fast, on Miss Crabtree's account, so I guess you will be able to keep up."

"Be sure I will," retorted Wilder, with a grim significance which the detective did not fully comprehend. "There will be a scene at the end of the trail which I am anxious not to miss. Unless I greatly mistake, it will be worth getting my neck stretched a foot or two!"

Brown made no response, deeming it only empty bravado on the part of his prisoner.

He placed Ruth in the saddle, then mounted behind her, guiding the horse and affording the maiden much needed support in so doing. Even had Ruth been strong enough, they could not have ridden much faster than a walk, for the good horse, now that the excitement of the death-chase was lacking, could hardly pass out of a walk.

Though for widely different reasons, each one of the trio was anxious to be at their journey's end, and more than once the reckless desperado broke out into a low, grim laugh as his fancy pictured the terrible surprise which awaited his captor.

They had not proceeded far before he was given serious food for reflection in three rockets which shot high up into the air, coming from a point at or near the Crabtree ranch. Could it be possible—bah! he had seen the flames bursting out at the door and windows as he rode away with his helpless captive. The building was in ashes long before this.

Yet he did not laugh again, and kept close to the heels of the worn-out horse in his eagerness to catch the earliest possible glimpse of the ruins.

The detective was troubled by no such hopes or fears, and could not understand the frightful curse which broke from Wilder's lips as he beheld the building still standing, plainly revealed by the big bonfire kindled near by.

Around this fire were gathered a number of armed men, and as Dan Brown recognized the Vigilantes, he uttered a clear, ringing shout that directed all eyes toward them.

For a moment there was hesitation and doubt, but when he, eager to set their worst fears at rest, shouted out that Miss Crabtree was alive and safe in his company, the excitement became intense.

In a moment they were gathered around, and stern old Noah Crabtree, with a heartfelt sob of joyful relief clasped his daughter to his bosom, covering her face with kisses.

And, at the same moment, David Crabtree leaped upon Dick Wilder and buried a long knife to the hilt in his heart!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SECRET OF THE CERTIFICATE.

SINCE Dan Brown of Denver was still living, with his head in its proper place upon his shoulders, who then was it that fell a victim to the subtle ferocity of Dick Wilder and his comrades?

To explain this, together with the wonderfully opportune appearance of the Rocky Mountain detective, we must glance back to the evening on which the ill-fated detective paid such a fearful penalty for his remarkable likeness to Dan Brown.

More than once before this singular resemblance in form, face and feature had stood him in good stead, and finally Dan Brown, even then celebrated and widely known as a daring,

successful detective, formed an alliance with Henry Thorold. He had thoroughly tested his skill, bravery, coolness and cunning. He knew that his new partner was true as steel, and though the fact of their alliance was not published to the outside world, the twin detectives worked together in admirable concert. Being already known to the majority of evil-doers in the West, Dan Brown naturally received credit from them for the exploits of Thorold as well as his own, and by his seeming ubiquity, was soon regarded as—very nearly the devil.

Henry Thorold remained in Denver when Dan Brown journeyed to Grenada on the hunt for Captain Moonshine, but in a strange manner he became possessed of very important information and at once set out to post his partner.

A notorious burglar had been captured while robbing a dwelling in Denver, and as there were several black counts laid up against him, he felt that matters would go hard with him unless he could make terms. In hopes of doing so, he sent for Dan Brown as the only member of the force on whose pledge he could depend. Brown being absent, Thorold responded in his place, and unsuspecting the substitution, the burglar made an important revelation as the price of his liberty.

He was a member of the band led by Captain Moonshine, though for several months he had been off active duty, working on his own hook. To save himself he was ready to betray the whole league, and did give a long list of names the originals of which he swore were either active members of the notorious band, or else secret allies from whom they obtained valuable information by means of which they were able to deal swift and sure blows.

Leaving the burglar in durance until the truth of his statements could be tested, Henry Thorold at once took the stage for Grenada, arriving only an hour or two before he was pointed out to the chosen assassin by Frank Blackwood for the man whom he so strangely resembled, though no kindred blood flowed in their veins.

One of the most important allies of the band named by the burglar, was Clara Castle, the same who made a curious proposal to the Rocky Mountain detective. She was declared to be "the woman" of Captain Moonshine. Her offer to betray the band and all their secrets if Dan Brown would marry her, confirmed this, and Henry Thorold was detailed to glean all he could concerning her, her associates, particularly of the male persuasion.

As chance—or fate—would have it, he had departed from Denver in such haste that he had forgotten to supply himself with much money, and in anticipation of the necessity of bribing, Dan Brown handed him his own pocket-book, forgetting the letter which afterward proved the detective's death-warrant.

It was while taking a preliminary survey of the ground that Henry Thorold was captured by Dick Wilder, and he it was whose headless body now lay in the black depths of Devil's Gulch.

Prominent upon the list of names furnished by the burglar, stood the name of Frank Blackwood. This name possessed a double interest for Dan Brown.

It is hardly necessary to state in so many words that the gallant detective had from the very first felt a powerful interest in Rachel Trowbridge. Her grace and beauty had made a deep impression upon his heart during that long stage-journey in company, before Captain Moonshine and his masked men came upon the scene in the dramatic manner described. Had such not been the case, the cool detective would not have made the bold attempt to rescue her, since by so acting he was endangering not only his life, for which he cared but little, but was seriously imperiling the success of the project on which he had staked his reputation. That this danger was incurred, the reader knows. By the card which he gave Rachel, his identity was discovered, and then the scheming against his life began.

Busy as he had been since reaching Grenada, Brown found time to study out the perils which threatened the fair young woman. He believed that Ezra Blackwood was playing a part, was in reality acting in concert with Captain Moonshine, and this belief was strengthened by finding that Frank Blackwood, his son, was one of those upon the list furnished by the burglar. This he had suspected before, and he likewise believed that the two lawyers were plotting against Rachel for their mutual benefit.

One thing still seriously puzzled him. If there was a fortune at stake, as he shrewdly surmised, why had father and son enlisted Captain Moonshine as the husband?

Only for that view of the outlaw chief's face which he obtained, this could be explained by the supposition that Frank Blackwood himself was the notorious Captain Moonshine. But he knew that could not be. There was not a single point of resemblance between the two, unless it was in the eyes. He had only obtained a brief view of the masked outlaw's face, but it was a clear one.

For some hours after the departure of Henry Thorold on his mission—which was to lead him

to his death—Dan Brown and Enoch Dodge remained closeted together in the city marshal's private office, consulting.

Naturally enough, Enoch Dodge felt considerable curiosity regarding the certificate of which so much has been said in these pages, and through which he had so nearly met his death at the hands of Billy Cooper.

Now, by adroitly shifting the conversation, he led up to the subject. Dan Brown smiled, for he soon saw what was troubling his honest friend, who was a true Yankee in his dislike for all mystery.

"You should have known all, had any thing happened to me, Enoch," he smiled. "The paper is hidden in my room, and the key to its place of concealment I put down in our secret cipher, giving it to your wife with instructions to hand it to you, in case I should turn up missing. Though I am not certain, I strongly suspect that the document is of great importance. Indeed, the very efforts which those rascals have made to recover it proves that. And on second thoughts, I have concluded that it will be safer in your iron vault than anywhere else."

"An' Sally never let on a word to me about it!" ejaculated the marshal, in provoked surprise.

"You see a woman can keep a secret, even from her husband," laughed the detective, arising and leaving the room.

He quickly returned, bearing with him the document for the recovery of which there had been so much plotting and planning. Seating himself at the table once more, he unfolded the paper—then uttered a cry of intense surprise.

The place where the masked bridegroom had signed his name, only a week before, was now blank and unsullied!

Dan Brown stared at the paper like one petrified. The name had been there, for he had noticed it just before putting the paper in hiding while the population of Grenada were engaged in burying the coffin which they all supposed contained his lifeless corpse. But now it had vanished leaving not a trace behind!

Then, acting with sudden energy, he snatched up the paper again and held it up against the hot chimney of the lamp. One moment thus, then he uttered another cry—this time one filled with a strange, fierce exultation, uttering:

"The secret of the certificate is solved at last!"

It is barely possible that the reader may not have forgotten the precise circumstances under which the masked bridegroom signed the name of "Beverley Brownell" to the paper testifying his marriage with Rachel Trowbridge.

Both Rachel and the clergyman signed the paper with pen and ink ready placed upon the small table. The outlaw came last, but with pretended carelessness, knocked the glass bottle of ink to the floor, where it was broken to pieces upon the stones. It will also be remembered that he found fault with the pen they had used, producing both ink and pen from an inner pocket, with which he signed his name, Beverley Brownell, then handing the paper to Rachel for her alone to learn the name of her husband.

Then Dan Brown of Denver made his bold stroke.

For reasons which will now be understood, this scene was minutely described at the time. The outlaw signed his name in black ink, but which would fade away and utterly vanish in a week's time. In order to do this without arousing suspicions, he broke the ink-bottle, and discarded the used pen lest some traces of the simple ink should remain when the other had faded away, thus betraying the fraud.

And now, brought out clear and distinct by the heat of the lamp, another name filled the blank—a name which had been written there before the strange wedding took place—the name of Frank Blackwood!

"It was written with what is called sympathetic ink," explained Brown, as Dodge eyed the paper dubiously. "And that explains why our friend was so anxious to get hold of the paper. He feared the name fading away would awaken suspicions of the truth—exactly as it did do!"

Early the next day, Dan Brown began his search for Frank Blackwood, only to learn that he had ridden out of town the night before, bound no one knew whither. He followed a false trail all that day, then returned to Grenada.

Nothing had been seen or heard of Henry Thorold. Feeling a strange depression for which he could not account, Brown went to bed. He spent the next forenoon in looking for his partner, but without success. Then, urged on by a feeling for which he could not account, he mounted his horse and set out for the Crabtree ranch, meaning to warn Rachel of the strange discovery he had made.

Unfortunately, he lost his way, and only neared the ranch in time to see the form of a man hastening away, bearing a woman in his arms.

He believed this was Frank Blackwood, abducting his wife, and his first impulse was to

rush upon him, and rescue Rachel. But a second thought changed his tactics.

If his surmise was true, no doubt the bold villain would hasten with his prize direct to the rendezvous of the outlaw band. He could not take her among honest men where she could tell her story, for she would be rescued and he lynched for the abduction, to a dead certainty.

So he dogged the abductor, keeping ready to interfere in case the necessity should appear urgent.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE WOLF'S JAWS.

No sooner had the three outlaws to whom he had given charge of Agnes Gill, fairly set out on their return to the new retreat selected by the road-agents, than Captain Moonshine leaped into the saddle, and, followed by the remainder of his force, started on a gallop for the Crabtree ranch to carry out the remainder of his night's work.

Though he felt pretty confident that Noah Crabtree and his herders would have left in answer to the appeal for aid from Thomas Munro's, long ere this, he did not wholly neglect caution, slowing down his horse when yet some distance from the building, advancing the more warily from seeing lights in the windows and through the open door.

Dick Wilder had meant well enough, and only for Rachel Trowbridge, doubtless the building would have been destroyed with all that was in it. Still deathly sick from the effects of the baleful drug, the maiden yet managed to rouse up and by a desperate struggle extinguish the fire before it had made much headway after licking up the spilled oil. And had Wilder delayed his retreat ten minutes longer, he must have seen that his diabolical scheme had failed.

Fighting the flames did Rachel good, and at the end, when the victory was won, her brain was clear as ever.

She turned her attention to Mrs. Crabtree first. The poor woman was badly bruised, but had received no injuries that a brief period of repose would not cure. David had fared worse. His skull was fractured, and though under different circumstances there is little doubt but what he would have eventually recovered, Dick Wilder was fated to be avenged on his slayer, even after death.

Rachel was still bending over the unconscious youth, when Captain Moonshine rode up to the door and leaped to her side, clasping her form in his sinewy arms almost before she was aware of her peril.

At the first glance she recognized the man whom she had wedded in a moment of romantic folly, but whom she now loathed with all the power of her passionate soul.

She did not scream or swoon. She fought desperately to free herself, but all in vain. With a grim laugh of triumph, Captain Moonshine bore her out of the building and passed her over to one of his men while he mounted his horse. Then, receiving her shuddering form in his arms once more, he rode away from the desolated ranch at a swift gallop, laughing in diabolical glee at the perfect success of his plans.

Twice during that terrible, never-to-be-forgotten night ride did Rachel Trowbridge strive to gain possession of a weapon from the belt of her abductor, resolved to slay him, even should her own life pay the forfeit the next moment, but as often was she foiled.

The first time the outlaw laughed mockingly, but as the attempt was repeated, he grew angry.

"Don't presume on my good nature too far, my beauty," he said, coarsely. "Try any more of your tricks, and I'll bind your hands behind you, besides putting a gag between your pretty teeth. I'll make you a good husband, as the world goes, if you are sensible. But rub my fur the wrong way too often, and be sure you shall feel my claws!"

Rachel made no reply, but she still watched for a chance to escape, or, failing that, to free herself forever from the loathsome claims of this monster in human shape. In vain. Captain Moonshine valued his prize too highly to throw away a chance, and when the night was far spent and they reached the rendezvous, Rachel was still helplessly in his power.

Leaving the care of all else to his fellows, Captain Moonshine alighted and bearing the maiden in his arms, entered the narrow passage that led to the cavern in which the road-agents had found refuge after the secret of their other retreat had become known to Dan Brown of Denver.

Situated deep among the rocky foothills, this cavern was even better concealed than the other had been, though not nearly so large or comfortably fitted up.

Bearing Rachel into a small chamber in the rock at the further extremity of the cavern, Captain Moonshine allowed her to rest upon her own feet, though still grasping her arm, while he struck a match and lighted a candle.

He uttered a low, chilling laugh as he noted her eager glance around them, and said:

"Not a very gorgeous affair for a bridal chamber, my dear, but it will have to serve

our purpose. As the wife of a bandit chief, you must expect your ups as well as your downs. Live in hopes that if you are obliged to rough it a little just at present, the future will more than make amends."

He took a step toward her, but as Rachel hastily retreated he paused, with another mocking laugh.

"The sooner you conquer that foolish modesty, the better, my angel. Don't forget that you are my lawful wife—that you married me with your eyes open and own free will. As your husband, I mean to claim and enjoy my rights. I will leave you for a few minutes, to compose yourself. When I return, I trust—for your sake—that you will be in a fitter mood for receiving your loving husband."

With these words he turned and strode away, leaving her alone. Rendered desperate by his thinly veiled threats, Rachel waited a few moments, then started to leave the rock-chamber—only to find her passage barred by a burly, forbidding ruffian, who said:

"You can't pass here without the cap'n's say-so!"

For a moment she thought of trying to bribe him, but reason told her that this would be in vain, and rather than expose herself to an insulting refusal, she retreated with her heart cold and heavy in her bosom.

It would be a painful task to attempt to paint her sensations at thus finding herself helplessly at the mercy of a ruthless fiend in human shape. All hope seemed lost, and like a hunted wild beast, she looked pantingly around in search of some weapon with which she might defend herself when the outlaw chief should return. But in vain. The room was utterly bare, save for the square boulder on which the candle rested, and a few old blankets thrown down in one corner.

Nearly two hours crept by without that hated form making its reappearance, and Rachel had begun to hope that something might yet turn up in her favor, when the sound of heavy footsteps rung hollowly along the narrow passage, and then she heard Captain Moonshine speaking to the man on guard over her.

"You can go now, Big Horn, I'll guard the lady myself. And mind you, no matter if you should hear some music in this quarter, don't trouble your head about it. Skin out!"

Rachel shuddered and turned paler than ever, for that thick, heavy voice told her that the outlaw chief had been drinking to excess, or at least heavily enough to arouse his most gross passions.

Nerved by despair, she arose from the rude bed of blankets in the corner and confronted him as he entered. There was something in her attitude or demeanor that awed him for the moment, despite his liquor sodden brain. His outstretched arms slowly fell to his side, and he muttered a low curse beneath his cowl, which he still wore.

"Don't be a fool, now!" he muttered, steadying himself by spreading his feet further apart. "I gave you good advice when I was here before—why in thunder didn't you follow it? I'm your lawful husband—I've got a claim on your submission and obedience, and I mean to have it, too."

"You may kill me—beyond that I can defy you!"

A low, mocking laugh parted his lips at this desperate speech. The sound of her voice seemed to drive away the fumes of the fiery liquor with which he had dosed himself.

"I may kill you by kisses and caresses, my proud beauty, but your life is in no danger otherwise. Just now, however, there is a little point of business to be decided; after that, I will prove to you that I am no craven in love!"

Rachel grasped eagerly at the respite offered in these words, from the terrible struggle which she knew must come soon.

"What point of business do you mean?" she said, speaking slowly, the better to hide the real horror which he inspired.

"About that certificate," he replied, his voice growing steadier and at the same time more menacing. "You know where it is. You must give it to me, or else tell me where I may find it. I have asked you twice before—this is the third and last time. Mind how you answer. More depends on it than you think—your very life does!"

Rachel was strongly tempted to tell a lie about it, but he was eying her so closely and keenly that she feared he would detect the equivocation, and she dared not give him such an excuse for bursting into a rage.

"I can only repeat what I told you then—I do not know where the paper is—I have never seen it since that night."

"If you are trying to deceive me, so much the worse for yourself when I make the discovery. Let it pass for the present. You remember what I told you when I left you here? I have come, my beauty, to reap the reward!"

She shrunk away from his approach, uttering a piercing scream for help. He laughed loud and recklessly.

"Scream until your pretty throat splits, and still there will come no answer save the echoes of your own voice. You are here wholly in my

power, and before we part, I mean to give you your first lesson in submission to the will of your lawful husband."

"I deny it—you are no husband of mine!" gasped Rachel, trying in vain to dart past him to seek safety in flight.

"No use to flutter, my dainty bird!" he cried in a tone of ferocious exultation, as he grasped her in his arms by a sudden plunge forward. "You are mine! God, man nor devil can save you now!"

"A lie, foul as your own black heart! I can and will save her!" rung out a clear, menacing voice.

CHAPTER XXX.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

So sudden and unexpected was the action of David Crabtree, that the fatal blow was dealt before a hand could be raised to prevent it. Without a groan Dick Wilder fell to the ground dead, his heart literally cloven in twain.

Instantly Dan Brown seized David, who made no resistance but quietly submitted.

"I swore I'd have his life, and I have kept my oath," he said, calmly, though his eyes still burned with a deadly fire as they rested upon the ghastly corpse of the desperado.

The detective was greatly annoyed, for he had counted on gaining some valuable information from the prisoner concerning the band of road-agents, but this feeling was obliterated by stronger emotion when he heard of the forcible abduction of Rachel Trowbridge. Mrs. Crabtree, hearing the disturbance, had managed to arise and creep to the window, recognizing the black garb worn by the marauders. This much she told to her husband, who had started for home on learning that the raiders on Munro's ranch had been driven off without doing any material injury. His pace was quickened when he saw the rockets sent up by David, who performed that duty the moment he recovered sufficiently to crawl outside to the store-house where the fireworks were kept.

Others of the company had noticed the signal, and promptly responded. They were on the point of setting out in quest of the marauders when Dan Brown came upon the scene with Ruth Crabtree in his company.

David Crabtree knew that there would be no safety for him so long as one of the notorious "family" was at liberty, now that he had stained his hands with the life-blood of a "brother." He had hesitated about telling all he knew to his stern father, even while Ruth was missing, for he could only do so by betraying the fact of the double role he had so long and successfully played. But now, as he recognized the celebrated detective, he resolved to confide all to him.

In the confusion consequent upon the return of one of the lost ones, and the tragedy which ended in the death of the avenger, he easily contrived to draw Dan Brown aside without attracting particular notice.

"I can tell you where you can find Captain Moonshine and his band; better than that, I can guide you to the rendezvous before day-dawn—and I will do so on one condition," he said, speaking rapidly.

"If you can really do this, your terms are agreed to before you name them," replied Dan Brown, quickly, but eying the lad with an air of doubt.

He knew that he had been seriously injured, and he feared that this abrupt proposal was but the vagary of a disturbed brain. David read this doubt in his face, and with a violent exertion of will, he calmed both his tone and features.

"I know what I am saying. There are two men among the party yonder who could tell you as much, and who could also reveal what I am about to do, for they are really working in the interests of Captain Moonshine."

"Who is he, this Captain Moonshine?"

"His name is Brownell; that is all I can say. We seldom catch a view of his uncovered face. But we are losing time."

"State your conditions," tersely said the detective.

"First, you must never disclose my part in this affair, least of all must the truth ever come to the ears of my father. Next, I must be pardoned for the wrongs I may have done while serving 'the family.' Last, you must either take those two men prisoners, on your own responsibility, or else place trusty men beside them to guard against treachery. One thing more. I will really guide you to the retreat, but it must be by signs such as you alone will notice. You must take the whole credit on your own shoulders. If you agree to this, say so."

There was no hesitation on the part of the detective. He would gladly have accepted for less advantageous terms.

He knew now that David Crabtree must have been one of the "family," but it was not likely that his crimes had been very serious, he was still so young. And for the sake of capturing or killing Captain Moonshine, he would have

winked at the escape of a dozen lesser criminals.

In a few hurried words David gave the detective a general idea of the course to be followed, promising to be near enough to give him more particular information whenever the need for such should arise.

Dan Brown accepted the situation, and carried it off most admirably. He collected the Vigilantes, announced his name and profession, adding:

"I was sent here for the purpose of ferreting out this band of notorious criminals, and bringing them to justice. Luckily I had a glimpse inside of the ring. One of the members of the league was captured and squealed on being adroitly pinched. From him I have learned the names of all belonging to the gang—Stop! Take one step or attempt to touch a weapon, and you are dead men!"

Noah Crabtree and his men stared aghast at the *tableau* then presented: two of their most trusted comrades, pale as death, trembling before the cocked and leveled revolvers held in the hands of Dan Brown!

"Surround those rascals and take them prisoners!" he added, sternly. "Quiet! by the stars above! if you attempt to escape, you go down each with a bullet in your brain!"

Mechanically his orders were obeyed. The two men were surrounded and disarmed. Noah Crabtree, recovering from his surprise, demanded what proof the detective held against the captives, whom no one had even suspected of treachery.

"Proof enough to hang them ten times over. Look at their faces—conscious guilt is written there too plainly to be mistaken. In good time more substantial proof shall be furnished. Their names are down on my black list, as I told you. For the present let them be bound and placed in charge of a guard whom you can trust. If they should escape, they might get to the robbers' retreat ahead of us, and then goodbye to our hopes of making a clean sweep!"

"Do you know where this retreat is?" eagerly cried Crabtree.

"I mean to lead you there before the sun rises again."

A wild cheer greeted this information, and no voice rung out louder than that of old Jack Gill. He knew nothing of what had transpired at his own house as yet. He had been returning in company with Noah Crabtree when David's signal was seen, and rode directly here.

There was no longer doubt or hesitation. The two unmasked traitors were carried into the house and two were left in charge of them, with orders not to close an eye or for an instant lose sight of their prisoners.

Then a fresh horse was saddled for the detective, and the party set out over the prairie at a rapid gallop.

Noah Crabtree tried to have David remain at the ranch, as not being fit for such a long and hard ride, but the lad obstinately persisted in bearing them company. He nor any of the rest, knew how seriously his skull was injured. The intense excitement lent him a fictitious strength. He would bear up until the victory was either won or lost, then the reaction would come.

There is no necessity of our describing that wild night ride in detail. Enough that they made better time than the road-agents had before them, and that David faithfully performed his part of the compact. He, his father and Dan Brown rode slightly in advance, the detective in the middle. Thus a simple sign whenever the course needed to be altered, was sufficient for him. None other saw these signals, and Dan Brown received all the credit.

The broken ground was reached, and as the vicinity of the cavern in which the road-agents had found refuge was neared, the pace of the Vigilantes became more moderate.

Watching his chance, while the party were dismounting and securing their horses, meaning to proceed the rest of the way on foot, David told Brown the password which the outlaws on guard would require, together with clear directions how to find the entrance to the cavern.

Thus armed, Brown selected Noah Crabtree and Jack Gill for his aids, and leaving the rest to follow slowly, he started on in advance to clear the way.

True to the information David gave, they found two of the outlaws on guard a few rods from the cave, who challenged them from under snug cover.

Brown promptly gave the password, adding:

"There's mischief afoot, boys! We'll have to lay low for a few days, even if we don't have to pull out for good. That infernal bloodhound, Dan Brown, has come to life again, and has raised a big *posse* in Grenada, swearing that he'll never draw off the hunt while one of the family treads the footstool! Is the captain inside? I must report to him!"

Excited by this startling news, both of the sentinels emerged from cover, and at a signal they were seized by powerful hands that effectually prevented all outcry. They were choked into insensibility, then securely gagged.

Dan Brown, when he saw that they still wore their black cloaks and cowls, was greatly relieved. Though he felt no doubt about killing or capturing the entire band, he feared for Rachel Trowbridge. If cornered, the outlaw chief was none too good to kill her outright through pure malignancy. Now he saw a chance to avert this peril.

"Strip them first, then bind and stow them away. You, Mr. Crabtree, go back and guide the others quietly here, waiting at the entrance, yonder, until you hear my signal. You, Mr. Gill, may join me in a brief masquerade, if you will."

"What are your plans?" demanded Crabtree. "I claim my share in the danger, whatever it is."

"You will have the largest share. I am going to put on these disguises, and enter the cave. I shall pretend to have important tidings, and demand to see the chief. With him once under my pistol, Miss Trowbridge will be safe enough. If the alarm was given first, his first act would be to kill her, rather than suffer her to be rescued."

"Let Gill go for the men. I will join in with you."

Brown was satisfied, but Gill was not. Still, Crabtree was his superior officer, and he could not openly demur, and rather sullenly he passed down the gulch.

The two adventurers quickly donned the cloaks and pulled the heavy cowls over their heads and faces, then boldly advanced to the black spot which marked the entrance to the cave.

A few feet inside this, they found a double blanket suspended from the low ceiling, which completely shut off all light from within. Pausing only to assure themselves that their weapons worked freely in their scabbards, the detective raised the blankets and passed into the dimly lighted chamber, followed closely by Noah Crabtree.

Before them were gathered over a score of men, the majority of whom were sleeping, though several were drinking and playing cards, near a fire which was necessary to take the damp chill off.

These suspended their playing and glanced at the new-comers curiously, though they plainly entertained no suspicions that they were other than they seemed.

"The devil is to pay, boys," hurriedly uttered Brown, admirably counterfeiting the voice of Dick Wilder. "Dan Brown has come to life again, and is after us with a big crowd. Where's the captain? I must see him and report."

"Look out you don't git a blue pill fer fust answer," retorted a ruffian, known as Big Horn. "He's back yender with the gal—reckon he's got mighty *pressin'* business with her, too, judgin' by that squeal!"

Even as he spoke there came the sound of a woman's frantic appeal for help—the screams which Rachel Trowbridge uttered as Captain Moonshine, fired by drink and lust, assaulted her.

Dan Brown recognized the voice, and noting the direction from whence the sound proceeded, he darted to the rescue, closely followed by Crabtree.

This headlong haste under the circumstances struck the road-agents as somewhat strange, and though they were as far as ever from suspecting the truth, they abandoned their game and followed after, satisfied that there would be a "circus" when Captain Moonshine found his vigorous courtship so unceremoniously interrupted.

Just in the nick of time Dan Brown reached the little chamber in the rock, and uttered the words which terminated the last chapter, supplementing them with a vigorous leap toward the surprised outlaw.

Captain Moonshine dropped Rachel and sprung nimbly to one side, drawing and cocking a revolver as swift as thought.

The detective's career would have ended then and there, for he could not close with the ruffian before the shot was fired, had it not been for Rachel. She flung herself against the road-agent, destroying his aim and causing him to stagger, almost fall to the rocky floor, and before he could recover his balance or cock his pistol again, Dan Brown had him by the throat in a veritable bull-dog gripe.

Grappling, they both fell heavily to the floor, the detective on top, Captain Moonshine's skull coming in contact with the rock so violently that he was knocked senseless.

Noah Crabtree saw that his comrade was equal to the capture alone, and turned upon the astounded road-agents who were uttering cries of wondering confusion at the strange scene.

The Vigilante chief opened fire upon them with a revolver in each hand, plying the weapons with terrible effect. And then wild cheers came from beyond, followed by rapid firing. The two survivors of those who had followed their supposed comrades, turned and fled—only to run into the arms of the enemy.

Crabtree was about to follow them, when a wondering cry from Dan Brown arrested him. And as he followed the direction of the detective's finger, he echoed that startled exclamation.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A DUEL FOR A WIFE.

CONFIDENT that at last he had got his hands fairly upon the prime object of his search, Captain Moonshine, Dan Brown of Denver, like a true detective, lost sight of everything else in his resolve to capture said criminal alive. Had an earthquake been in progress, he would not have relaxed his bull-dog gripe on the outlaw's throat until the road-agent was conquered; or while he himself drew the breath of life.

They fell to the ground together, struggling furiously, but all at once the form of the masked outlaw grew limp and nerveless. Brown knew what this meant. Even while engaged in that mad wrestle for life, he noticed how heavily the skull of his antagonist had come in contact with the rough rocky floor. He knew that this abrupt yielding was not feigned, but he still gripped the outlaw's throat with one hand while he removed knife and pistol from his person with the other.

Then, to make sure that he had bagged the right game, Dan Brown grasped the black cowl and tore it away from the head and face of his captive. And as the gleam of the one candle fell upon the upturned face, the detective gave vent to that sharp cry of wonder.

For there, easily recognizable despite the fact of its being discolored and swollen, was the face of Frank Blackwood!

More than this the two men were not given time to discover just then, for the surviving road-agents, now fighting desperately like men who know there is a death-rope around their throats, were being forced back along the narrow passage by the enthusiastic Vigilantes under old Jack Gill. Pausing only to clasp handcuffs on his prisoner, Dan Brown of Denver and Noah Crabtree blocked the further retreat of the outnumbered road-agents.

"Throw down your weapons and surrender, or you die like dogs!" the detective shouted, in a clear voice that rose high and distinct above the terrible clamor of exploding pistols, clashing steel, fierce curses and yells of rage, hollow groans of those who sunk to the blood-stained floor, and the horrible screams of those whose awful wounds for the time overcame their manhood.

He was answered by an angry yell from the burly Big Horn, who recognized him now for what he really was.

"Kill him ef we don't make another count—it's that bloody hound, Dan Brown of Denver!" he howled, and fired two shots in swift succession at the hated foe.

Dan Brown heard Rachel Trowbridge cry out, and believing that she had been smitten down by the missiles which he had narrowly escaped, uttered a fierce cry as he sent a bullet crashing through the brain of the outlaw. Then he was among the huddled wretches, a veritable fiend of battle. While his own body appeared to be impervious to knife or bullet, he dealt death around him with every stroke.

Noah Crabtree was beside him, fighting like some grizzled but still invincible lion, while the Vigilantes, led by Jack Gill, now just in his glory, pressed the doomed road-agents hardly from the rear.

One minute of this horrible struggle breast to breast, then the few survivors of the outlaw band dropped their weapons and cried out for quarter.

"The man that strikes another blow will have to fight me!" thundered stern old Crabtree at the top of his mighty voice. "Take the living prisoners, but harm them not!"

As for Dan Brown, the moment he saw the victory was assured, he turned and rushed back to the rock chamber, fearing the worst. Instead, he saw Rachel erect and apparently unharmed, though one of the shots fired by Big Horn had fairly grazed her temple, drawing forth the cry that moved the detective to desperation.

This sight of the one whom he had learned to love with all the ardor of his fiery heart, alive where he feared her dead, a strange glow in her eyes as they rested upon his face—the light of love as instinct told him—caused him to forget all else, and with a low, glad cry he sprang to her side, clasping her yielding form passionately to his breast.

There was only one spectator to this scene. Frank Blackwood recovered his senses, and recognizing Rachel in the embrace of his bitterest enemy, staggered to his feet with a hoarse curse of furious rage, raising his manacled hands together and striving to fell the detective.

Once again did Rachel save her lover. She saw the threatening blow, and pushed the detective back with a warning cry. The next moment "Captain Moonshine" went down before a neatly planted blow from the fist of Dan Brown.

As he fell, Brown noticed a curious object lying upon the floor, and picked it up for examination while holding his enemy prostrate with one foot planted upon his breast. And there he held the mystery which had from the first enshrouded Captain Moonshine, concealing his identity even from the most trusted members of his band, and enabling him to play a

double role without fear of detection by either friend or foe.

The disguise was a mask of dark flesh-colored silk, to which the glossy beard, mustaches and hair were secured by being woven into the material. The nose was padded and stiffened, changing the wearer's nasal organ from pug to Roman. Taken altogether, the mask and wig was a marvel of cunning art.

Besides "Captain Moonshine," only ten of the outlaw band had been taken alive, the remainder being slain while desperately fighting. They had not died wholly unavenged, though the loss was greatly disproportionate, owing to the completeness of the surprise.

As several of the Vigilantes were severely wounded, two men were at once dispatched to Grenada for stretchers by which they might be removed. Meanwhile the others made preparations for passing the remainder of the night where they were. The dead bodies were removed, after being identified and their names indicated by a cross upon the list of the order possessed by Dan Brown of Denver.

The recesses of the underground retreat were thoroughly searched for any runaway road-agents, and while thus engaged, Jack Gill experienced a terrible shock, discovering his wife, whom he had, until now, believed safe at home, lying bound and gagged in a narrow niche in the wall.

In her hysterical joy at being rescued from what she believed was almost certain death, Agnes made a full confession of the past, admitting that she was the lawful wife of Frank Blackwood.

This was a heavy blow to the honest old rancher, and though he freely granted the forgiveness she pleaded for, his weather-beaten face was strangely white and his manner subdued when he left her, to perform his other duties.

All were weary and well-nigh worn out by the hard work they had undergone since the rocket-signal was sent up from the ranch owned by Thomas Munro, and the majority, knowing that hours must elapse before their messengers could return from Grenada, were only too glad to accept the proposal made by Jack Gill that they lay down to rest, leaving him on guard. The prisoners were securely bound. There could be no danger. If any straggling member of the band should chance that way, sturdy old Jack would give the alarm in good time.

Knowing nothing of the story told by Agnes, Dan Brown made no objection. He too was glad to be relieved from the duty of watching, not because he wished to pass the hours of waiting in sleep, however. Together in the little rock-chamber, he and Rachel Trowbridge were passing the happiest moments of their lives, thus far.

Jack Gill was acting with a purpose. His brain was full of the terrible revelation made by his wife, and though he knew that, if left alone, her lawful husband would certainly pay the penalty of his manifold crimes with his life, he had resolved upon taking vengeance in his own hands.

He patiently waited until the Vigilantes were all asleep, then bent over the prostrate form of Frank Blackwood, freeing his limbs and motioning him to follow. The criminal knew that his enemy had learned all, and believed that he intended to slay him, yet he arose and followed the man in silence. He knew that death was inevitable, and preferred this method to the shameful punishment by the rope in the hands of the hangman.

Jack Gill led the way in utter silence out of the cave, only pausing when a narrow shelf was reached, smooth and level, but bordering an abyss of frightful depth. Here he paused and for the first time spoke aloud:

"You know what I brung you here fer. The little woman told me her story this mornin'. You treated her like a p'izen dog, but I'm goin' to give you a fa'r shake fer your life. Ef you kin kill me, all right. Ef you don't, I'll kill you. An' then I'll marry the little woman over ag'in. Thar's a knife, jist like my own. Take it, an' pray fer the devil to help ye now!"

With a snarling cry of joy, Blackwood picked up the weapon. This was far more than he had dared to hope for. Only one life between him and liberty! Nerved by the thought, he leaped upon the old man, their blades striking fire as they met and crossed.

Unknown to Jack Gill, Agnes had watched his movements, and the moment he left the cavern with Blackwood, she hastened to arouse Noah Crabtree, begging him speed to the aid of her husband—for such she still regarded the rancher.

Speedy as were the movements of the Vigilante chief and his men, he came near being too late. He was guided by the clash of opposing steel, and scrambled up the rocks, bidding his subordinate hold his rash hand.

Instead, Jack Gill, determined not to be robbed of his vengeance, pressed his attack with redoubled vigor, closing with and overthrowing his enemy. But just as his arm was raised to deal the finishing blow, it was seized by Crabtree.

Freed from his bitter enemy, Blackwood staggered to his feet, and before a hand could close upon him, he flung himself headlong down the dizzy depth upon the ragged rocks below!

CHAPTER XXXII.

JUSTICE METED UNTO ALL.

THE Vigilantes lost no time in descending to the bottom of the gulch, but they found only the horribly mangled remains of the dead road-agent chief. After a brief consultation, the sickening object was covered over with stones and boulders, and left there to molder away as the years rolled on.

Dan Brown was very much annoyed at thus being cheated out of his brightest triumph, but he soon forgave old Jack Gill when Agnes confided to him and Rachel the true cause of the rancher's action. Their eyes met—those of the lovers—and each could see that the same thought was working in the mind of the other. There was no longer even the frail barrier between them. As his lawful wife was still living, the ceremony performed on that night not long past, was only a farce. Rachel was still Rachel Trowbridge.

"But not for long, my queen!" softly whispered the detective, in her not unwilling ear. "Make the most of your short respite, for there must be another marriage service read ere long, and I will make sure that it is strictly binding!"

Agnes Gill—as we will still call her—saw that there was no further use for her, and silently glided back to the side of honest old Jack.

Soon afterward the stretchers for the wounded men arrived, together with a vast crowd of excited and exultant citizens of Grenada, who could not believe the glorious tidings without ocular demonstration.

Glorious was the reception of the cortege as it entered the lively little mining town. Dan Brown of Denver received a perfect ovation, from which he was glad to escape by hastening into the Golden Eagle with blushing Rachel Trowbridge hanging upon his arm. And was not Enoch Dodge the proud man that day? It was his friend who had wrought all this glorious work—and for the remainder of that day his bartenders were kept busy handing out free liquor to the citizens who flocked thither to celebrate the extermination of the notorious "family" headed by Captain Moonshine.

There is not much more pertaining to this chapter from the eventful life of the great Rocky Mountain Detective, which the intelligence of the reader cannot supply.

Ezra Blackwood, on learning what had occurred that morning, including the capture of his son (the messengers were as yet ignorant of the tragic death of the road-agent) hurriedly departed from Grenada on the early stage. But he was fated not to escape the punishment which his criminal plottings deserved. Only a few miles out from Grenada, the stage upset, and the old lawyer was picked up dead, his neck being broken. Fortunately he was the only sufferer by the accident.

One of the men who was with Dick Wilder when Henry Thorold was murdered through being mistaken for Dan Brown of Denver, made full confession of the horrible deed. The mutilated remains were recovered from Devil's Gulch, and given a Christian burial by his friend and business partner.

David Crabtree never recovered from the injury received at the hands of Dick Wilder, but immediately after reaching home, sunk into insensibility which lasted until death came to his relief. Charges were made against him by the two men arrested at the Crabtree ranch, but no one believed them. It was set down to malice and a yearning for revenge upon Noah Crabtree.

Dan Brown sacredly kept his pledge to David, and never even hinted the truth to his beloved wife.

Jack Gill heartily forgave Agnes for the deception she had practiced toward him, and publicly wedded her over again. And Agnes learned to love the old man, even more tenderly than she had Frank Blackwood in her girlish days. They are still living on the cattle farm, happy as the day is long, and with a young family growing up about them.

Ruth Crabtree never married, though she is still living. The memory of Will Wilder—more sinned against than sinning—is still sacred to her.

Enoch Dodge still "runs" the Golden Eagle, and to-day is mayor of his pet town.

Last, but by no means least, come Mr. and Mrs. "Dan Brown of Denver." They were married within a month from the day on which "Captain Moonshine" met his death. Though his wife was so rich, Dan Brown would not abandon his profession, nor did Rachel ask him to do so. No one can glory half so much in his widely-extended reputation as the lovely wife of "DAN BROWN OF DENVER, THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN DETECTIVE."

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